



FINDING GOD IN OUR QUESTIONS

An Introduction to Christian Apologetics

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INTRODUCTION

With all its twists and turns, joys and pains life certainly has a common thread. It is filled with many questions. Questions are a peculiar thing. Through them we can discover life and learn something about the universe and ourselves. Yet they can also yield great confusion. At times we ask, "What in the world is my life about?" and to be honest, the answers do not always come easily. The beauty of creation, the glories and horrors of human beings, the mystical call of the spiritual life, the centrality of love and the finality of death all provoke deep questions. What can we learn about life, beauty and meaning if we ask them honestly? Questions can be like breadcrumbs marking the trail that leads to truth and hope...even God.

When I became a follower of Jesus as a university student I had so many questions about my new faith. I had questions about the interrelations of science and belief in God. I had questions about the Bible, a fascinating collection of ancient writings I was reading for the first time. I had questions about why Christian college kids seemed to be trying to avoid both sex and beer. I had so many questions I didn't know what to do but ask them. So ask them I did: to anyone and everyone who would listen and seemed to have some wisdom around the subjects of my interest.

At this point I ran into a couple of interesting responses. The first was a strange response from some students who grew up in certain churches. They told me that we should not ask questions but that we should just have faith. I had no idea what that meant but it sounded like a recipe for disaster. How could I learn more without asking questions about what Christians taught and believed? Furthermore, all my non-Christian friends had nothing but questions *for me* which sort of reinforced my desire to find some answers. In this same season of life, one of my friends said to me, "you would really enjoy reading some Christian apologetics!" Being a science and math guy and not having the most sophisticated vocabulary at the time, I quipped in response, "I'm not saying sorry to anyone for believing in Jesus." Of course the word *apology* and *apologetics* have a nuanced meaning that I was unaware of in my own etymological

ignorance. Apologetics is actually a discipline of theology that gives answers to questions about the Christian faith. We'll pick that back up quite a bit in a moment.

What I found that God was not afraid of my questions and by following them in faith, I always ended up following him. I found God in a deep way by *asking them*. Questions for me were not a hindrance to faith in Jesus; they were a portal and entry way. They were a portal to a great appreciation for the breadth and depth of the truth of the gospel and led to an actual deepening of intimacy with the God I loved.

THE ROLE OF QUESTIONS

Human questions can be used in one of two directions in relationship to God. They can be used in following God or they can be used in rebellion against God. Many times people ask questions to which they really do not want answers. They only want to provoke doubt and leave people in a dark forest of skepticism and disbelief. Such questions are simply smokescreens¹ to avoid getting to the heart of the matter, or they can also be a wicked suppression of the truth like little middle fingers before the face of God. Over the years I have noticed that deeply intellectual people handle questions about faith in different ways. I have observed some with hostility to God and a mind completely closed towards the truths and possibilities of Christian faith. I have watched others with an open mind and a heart willing to follow the trail wherever it may lead. It seems to me that God's intervention and activity in a person's life has been the main difference here. I do know this: coming in humility and openness always leads to a better place when asking questions about God. Questions asked in the posture of faith, hope and love can be a wonderful tool guiding us towards God's truth. Asking them with a sneering cynicism can lead one into a damnable place.



In this essay I hope to take us towards our questions in hope of finding sturdy answers for the soul as it sojourns on the earth with God. To do so I want to first introduce you to the discipline of Christian Apologetics and its helpfulness to the task of the church. I then want to encourage all of us to interact in wisdom with questions people actually have: real people, our friends and their real questions. Finally, I want to conclude with some thoughts about the interplay between our intellectual questions and the necessity for God's help and illumination at every stage of seeking answers. There will also be two appendices on apologetic systems and the content of apologetics both ancient and modern. Now, without delay, let's move to our introduction to Christian Apologetics.

¹ Smokescreen questions is a term I first observed used by Dr. J. Budziszewski in coaching college students to deal with questions. See J. Budziszewski, *How to Stay Christian in College* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2004), 64-72.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

Far from being an exercise in saying that you are sorry, the term *apologetics* is derived from an ancient Greek word which means to give a reasoned defense of something.² Plato's ancient account of the trial of Socrates before the leaders of Athens was simple entitled "The Apology of Socrates."³ It recounts the old philosopher's defense of himself and his work against charges levied against him of atheism and the corruption of the youth.⁴ This well-traveled Greek term is the word we find as we come to the New Testament writings which describe the work of the early Christian community. The Bible both demonstrates that the early church gave a reasoned defense of the gospel as well as an exhortation for us to do so as well. We will first look at Apologetics in the New Testament and then the robust witness in church history of Christians working for the proclamation and defense of the gospel.

Apologetics in the New Testament

In the New Testament of the Holy Bible the same term is used by two of the preeminent leaders of the early Christian movement. First, a teacher of the faith named Paul told his friends in a church in the city of Philippi that his work had been for the "*defense and confirmation*" of the gospel (Philippians 1:7). He goes on to say that he had been put in jail precisely due to this defense. The word he uses for defense in this chapter is the word from which we derive our term *apologetics*. Furthermore, the apostle Peter exhorted the early church to do several things in 1 Peter 3:15. They are to first set apart Christ as Lord in their own hearts. Second, they are to always be prepared to give a *defense*, an *apologia*, when asked for the reason they have for the hope that is within them. Finally, they are to do this in a manner that is gentle and respectful towards their friends. Openly advocating and defending the truth of the gospel was both the habit of Paul and the exhortation of Peter.

In addition to the clear New Testament witness of Peter and Paul we also have the writings of the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. This two part work was compiled by a follower of Jesus named Luke who was the traveling companion of Paul and a leader in first century Christianity. At the beginning of Luke and Acts he writes the following:

Luke 1:1-4 ¹Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have *certainty concerning the things you have been taught*.

² See ἀπολογία in Walter Bauer and others, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³ Louis Markos, *Apologetics for the 21st Century* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 17.

⁴ Atheism in that he did not advocate for the pantheon of ancient Greece and corruption in that his method was seen as deconstructive in that he questioned everything.

Acts 1:1-3 ¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by *many proofs*, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Here we see Luke, a physician by training, seeking to explain clearly the truth about Jesus in his gospel and then confirm the truth of Jesus' resurrection and ministry carried on through his church. His concern was that a new follower of Jesus would have "certainty concerning the things he had been taught" and then understand all God had done through the apostles to expand the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Luke we see all Jesus taught and did and in the book of Acts we see what his leaders were about in following his commission for their lives after he was gone. In Acts we see Peter and Paul proclaiming the gospel and giving explanations of the gospel to various audiences and contexts in the ancient world. Ajith Fernando, Sri Lankan Christian leader and Scholar, describes the messages proclaimed in Acts as all having a strong apologetic context.⁵ Indeed the early church was proclaiming the good news of Jesus (evangelism) and defending the gospel as people inquired into the message they preached (apologetics). Commending and defending the gospel is the biblical model so we must maintain this intricate connection

Apologetics in Church History

Church Fathers/Early Patristic Period

In the first century after the apostolic era⁶, we see right away the rich work of Christian Apologists emerging. Justin Martyr wrote several works of apologetics in the 2nd century AD interacting with Greek philosophical concepts and defending the faith through rational discourse. It was not simply an intellectual game for Justin as he was executed AD 165. His crime was defending Christian teachings in a debate with a cynic philosopher named Crescens. Furthermore, in the third century, an early follower of Jesus named Origen wrote a work entitled *Contra Celsum* giving an answer to a Platonist philosopher named Celsus. Apparently this guy was accusing Christians of being dumb-dumbs and Origen sought to intellectually refute his claims.



Augustine of Hippo

When we arrive in the fifth century we encounter the massive literary efforts of St. Augustine of Hippo. A massively influential (and controversial) theologian to this day, he also wrote a significant apologetic to the detractors against Christianity in his day. Augustine was a bishop in the church after the times of Constantine when Church and Roman Empire had effectively become one. The ideology of that time

⁵ Ajith Fernando, *Acts, the Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 30.

⁶ The apostolic age or era simply refers to the first generation of Christians after the death and ascension of Jesus. This age comprises the bulk of first century Christianity and includes the work of the apostles and that of those known as the apostolic fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna).

merged the idea of Rome as the eternal city with the idea that it was the culmination and arrival of the Kingdom of God. The crucified and risen Jesus had brought the world-dominating Roman Empire to heel and therefore it was to be the crown of the work of God on the earth. Then something happened. Alaric, King of the Visigoths sacked Rome and the already crumbling Empire was shown to be something less than the Kingdom of God. In this time, many pagan thinkers accused this fall of Rome on it switching its gods to the worship of Jesus. The fall of Rome, so they said, was the fault of the people abandoning the traditional gods in favor of Jesus and the Christian religion. It was in this setting that Augustine wrote his now classic *City of God*, which laid forth a Christian view of history and separated the city of man and the rule and reign of Jesus. Jesus's church always traveled among the city of man but the two were not to be seen as one; they were, in fact, at odds with one another. Political rule and the rule of the King of heaven were not to be collapsed into one. They are separate. The interesting thing about Augustine is his methodology of entering debate with the pagans. He refuted their claims and then told the greater narrative of the Kingdom that has no end which should not be identified with Rome⁷...or America for that matter.

Thomas Aquinas

Later in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, the looming medieval luminary, engaged in a similar apologetic project with the Islamic thinking of his day. Leading up to this time the ancient works of Aristotle had been rediscovered by Arabic thinkers and were leading to various advances in natural philosophy, ethical reasoning, mathematics and logic. At the time, Christian Europe was introduced to Aristotelian thinking through the translated works of the Muslim philosopher Averroes. In the mid thirteenth century, Thomas wrote his work *Summa Contra Gentiles* as an answer to the Islamic thinking that was pouring into Europe. For several hundred years Islamic forces had sought to conquer the European continent by force of arms and had succeeded in fully annexing the Iberian Peninsula. Many know that Charles the hammer Martel fought back the Islamic invasions militarily but fewer today know that the intellectual bastions of Europe were manned by Christian theologians and apologists such as Thomas Aquinas. He interacted with Aristotle, created a unique synthesis between faith and philosophy and, as some would argue, set the table for the scientific revolution which took place in Europe in the centuries that followed.⁸

Early Modern and Modern Apologists

Even further along in history we find the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal waging with the skeptics of his day. Closer to our own times we find British thinkers GK

⁷ See Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine & Aquinas* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Chang lays forth a strategy for apologetics derived from these two historical Christian leaders who served at different historical epochs. What he finds in common with both Augustine and Thomas is that they entered debate with Christianity's critics with their terms, exposed the flaws in their arguments and then captures the truth they were getting at retold within the Christian story.

⁸ The most influential thinker along these lines is Pierre Duhem and his massive work *Le système du monde: histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic* (The System of World: A History of Cosmological Doctrines from Plato to Copernicus. For an introduction to Duhem, see Roger Ariew, "Pierre Duhem," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/duhem/> (accessed 9/14/2011). See also

Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, Malcom Muggeridge and CS Lewis⁹ calling out in the wilderness of the crumbling Christian civilization of Great Britain. We observe the American thinker Francis Schaeffer pushing the West to examine its effort to deconstruct itself.¹⁰ In our own day men like Francis Collins, Michael Behe, William Dembski, Alister McGrath and John Lennox¹¹ are interacting with the modern sciences when that enterprise overstates a naturalistic case. Apologist Ravi Zacharias engages the existential issues of the day¹² and men such as William Lane Craig are doing philosophy in the public sphere of intellectual debates on topics such as the existence of God, the objectivity of moral values and the historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.¹³

In summary, we observe both in the New Testament Scriptures and in the pages of church history that God's people are exhorted to contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3). Pascal describes well the apologetic enterprise of the people of God in his classic work *Pensées*:

*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.*¹⁴

It is the work of God to convert and convict people of sin and allow them to see the light of the gospel in the face of Jesus Christ. We are to preach the gospel as it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (Romans 1:16). We are also to give a reason for the hope we have, doing so with gentleness in our flow and respect for people (1 Peter 3:15). The ways in which we may go about the apologetic task is the focus of the next section.

THE PRACTICE OF APOLOGETICS



In every era we must actually put into practice what the apostle Paul called the defense and proclamation of the gospel. Apologetics is an interesting area of study and way of life and there are several different approaches to the task.¹⁵ To introduce the practice of apologetics let me use an analogy from American Football. Any good football team will have several different facets to it. There is a defense that keeps the

⁹ See Markos. Louis Markos new work focuses several chapters on the thought of Chesterton, Sayers and Lewis. For those wishing to be introduced to these British apologists Markos book is to be commended.

¹⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990).

¹¹ See Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God : A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box : The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). William A. Dembski, *The Design Revolution : Answering the Toughest Questions About Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker : Has Science Buried God?*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Lion, 2007); Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

¹² His early work reflected lectures given on various college campuses in the early 1990s – see Ravi K. Zacharias, *Can Man Live without God* (Nashville: W Pub. Group, 1994).

¹³ Craig's summary work is his textbook William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith - Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

¹⁴ Quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics - a Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grover: IVP Academic, 2011), 25.

¹⁵ See Appendix 1 at the conclusion of this essay on Apologetic Schools and Methodologies.

other team from advancing the ball and scoring. There is also an offense which seeks to overcome the defense of the other team. There are also special teams which focus on important transition plays and can be incredibly important to a game. Special teams can actually tilt the outcome of a game with a punt return or a blocked kick turning the tide of momentum in mere seconds. Each team also has a culture and manner in which it plays the game so we must say a quick word about the flow we have in doing apologetics as well. The following sketch of the apologetic task using these categories: team culture, defense, offense and special teams. Each is necessary and requires a certain type of skill.¹⁶

Team Culture

On the one hand it is incredibly helpful in traveling with people over time and answering their objections, providing reasons for faith and helping others come to a place of openness to give the gospel a hearing. On the other hand, I have seen Christians get really into apologetics and become bull dogs for the faith just wanting to battle everyone and smash their arguments into oblivion. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias has quoted an apropos Indian proverb on numerous occasions which simply states "*Once you've cut off a person's nose, there's no point giving them a rose to smell.*"¹⁷ The meaning is clear. If we want people to hear and understand the beauty of the gospel we must carry ourselves in a way that does not alienate and unnecessarily offend. Of course the gospel itself will be offensive and foolish to some people.¹⁸ Above I am speaking about Christians being jerks as they attempt to share the gospel of the grace of God with others. The message of the gospel should be the offensive piece, not our treatment of others. It is possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

In the realm of apologetics we need to realize our aim in defending the gospel is so that we gain a hearing and not so we turn people off with arrogant answers to questions they may or may not be asking. Giving a reason for our hope should not simply devolve into a food fight of intellectual arguments but rather serve as an invitation to a meal and a persuasion that the meal is indeed worth showing up for. Gentleness and respect should be the flow and culture of our team in giving our answers.

Apologetics on Defense

As mentioned above the basic focus of apologetics is defending the truth claims of the gospel. Christian scholars William Dembski and Jay Richards summarize the defensive nature of apologetics well: *To sum up, the task of the apologist is to find counterarguments to the arguments being used to attack the faith...Apologetics is defending the "core" of the Christian Faith.*¹⁹ This defensive posture of answering objections to Christian doctrine has also been called "negative" apologetics by some

¹⁶ The football analogy is used by the late Ron Nash in Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason - Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 16.

¹⁷ This proverb has been quoted in numerous places by Dr. Zacharias, even in describing the manner of their ministry – see <http://www.rzim.org/aboutus.aspx>

¹⁸ See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2 Corinthians 2:12-16, Galatians 5:11

¹⁹ William Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 42.

philosophers. It is showing that the reasons against belief are not so strong after all.²⁰ An example would be if someone were to say "I don't believe Jesus rose from the dead because we've never seen a dead person rise." At this point, the Christian would want to defend the gospel claim of Jesus' resurrection with some sort of historical and theological argument. In summary, apologetics as defense will respond when someone objects to some core Christian teaching and explain why this doctrine stands as true against the objection.

Apologetics on Offense

Though certainly necessary, the Christian seeking to provide a reason for the hope that she has is not limited to bunkering down in defense. Apologetics may also go on the offense and offer "positive" reasons why people should believe. In this case we are actually seeking to show that our faith is actually true by providing positive reasons to believe. Some see this project as too difficult or too ambitious as no one will ever become a Christian by getting argued into the kingdom. I fully agree. Yet this does not mean that certain apologetic arguments for the existence of God, the deity of Jesus and other truth claims cannot be helpful in the process.

Christian philosopher William Lane Craig acknowledges a similar idea in his treatment of faith and reason. Craig differentiates between the certain knowledge of the truth of the gospel which is the privilege of the believer and the task of rationally demonstrating the truth of the gospel to others. *Knowing* Christianity to be true, according to Craig, only comes by the inner witness and confirmation of the Holy Spirit. Such knowledge is true and certain and is properly available only to the soul that has been converted and is alive to God in Christ. *Showing* Christianity to be true, however, requires demonstrating its truths to others in a reasonable, comprehensible fashion with the intention to persuade.²¹ As long as we understand that it is the gospel that is the power of God to save people, we can be free to use positive arguments for various Christian teachings as a means. Let me explain further.

When the gospel is shared with others, we admit that we are sharing with individuals who have certain presuppositions, life experiences, relationships, intellectual background and perhaps professional training. This forms what we may call their *evangelistic environment*, or the *historical situation* of their soul. Some of the environment of the person may prove to be fertile ground and open windows to the gospel while some may not be so useful soil. With Scripture and the scriptural viewpoint as our foundation, we may properly use positive apologetic arguments when the situation calls for it. The discerning witness should be equipped with many tools at his disposal as he proclaims the gospel. One could easily see how an understanding of cosmology would be of use if proclaiming Christ with a person with scientific interests, or how an historical argument for the resurrection might be of interest to a history teacher. Just as God may use a tragedy in one's life to bring them to a readiness to hear, it also seems quite plausible that God may use good reasons and argument as well. If God wants to open a

²⁰ Nash, 14, 15. Nash follows philosopher George Mavrodes in his use of "negative" and "positive" apologetics when approaching this subject.

²¹ Craig, 43-60.

heart to hear his Word through pre-evangelistic engagement by the use of positive apologetic discussion, he certainly may do so.²²

Apologetics on Special Teams

One of the fun things to see in a football game is the block of a kick and the quick turnaround touchdown that makes the whole crowd go crazy. The kick blocking team goes after things with some focused aggression. You must break through the walls the kick team has put up to keep you away from the ball. Many times people put up walls, cling to false belief systems and put obstacles in the way that make it hard for them to hear the gospel message.

As one matures in the faith I believe it is helpful to be able to ask questions, create doubt in unbelieving worldviews and point to the absurdity of life without God. You could call this way of doing apologetics many things: questioning the questioner, tearing down strongholds, positive deconstruction²³, challenging presuppositions, etc.

Dr. Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, asks those skeptical of Christianity to look deeper at the basis for their objections to faith and see whether these are well-founded. In short he asks them to doubt their doubts.²⁴ He writes as follows:



My thesis is that if you come to recognize the beliefs on which your doubts about Christianity are based, and if you seek as much proof for those beliefs as you seek from Christians for theirs—you will discover that your doubts are not as solid as they first appeared.

Other apologists have also used similar indirect methods to help unbelievers to seriously examine the implications of their disbelief or apathy towards God. One prominent 20th century proponent was Francis Schaeffer, who vigorously worked to ask people to see all the absurdity and meaninglessness that arose from western worldviews that declared God dead or irrelevant.²⁵ If there is no God then the implications are staggering and have led many philosophers to nihilistic despair. Friedrich Nietzsche was perhaps one of the more honest atheists in history in that he saw clearly the implications of unbelief and wrote about this eloquently in his parable entitled *The Madman*²⁶. In it he describes the implications of loss of belief in God. Many today are not so awake and remain apathetic about life's ultimate questions:

²² The Apostle Paul's interactions with gentile farmers and philosophers in the book of Acts (Acts 14 and 17 respectively) seem to illustrate this as part of his practice when preaching the gospel.

²³ I first read this term being used by a British evangelist named Nick Pollard. See Nick Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult - How to Interest the Uninterested* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997).

²⁴ Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, 1st Riverhead trade pbk. ed. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), xviii.

²⁵ See "The Absurdity of Life without God" in Craig, 65-90.

²⁶ For a dramatic reading of Nietzsche's *Madman* see the following reading by Ravi Zacharias set to images on YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO5MytakLy8>

- ⊕ Where did we come from?
- ⊕ Is there any purpose to our lives?
- ⊕ Do we have the wisdom to harness technology that will destroy us and the environment?
- ⊕ What happens when my loved ones die? When I die?
- ⊕ Where may I ground my hope? Why not despair?

The apologetics special teams challenge the beliefs of the day, question the intellectual assumptions upon which they are based and deconstruct ideologies so that people might say: *Well, why do you believe in God? What is the reason for the hope that you have?*

Our society today is steeped in moral and epistemological relativism. It is swarming with hostility and lacking civility in our discourse with one another. It is drowning in abusive sexual perversions. It shouts for universal human rights without giving any intellectual grounds for why such rights are inalienable without a creator and built-in dignity of human beings. It preaches a gospel that money and fame are all that matters and chews up human beings in the jaws of greed. The special teams of apologetics should rightly cause these ideas to teeter and fall as they actually *are* a house of cards. Sadly, it is precisely upon these shaky foundations that many in modern society build their lives. It is a loving friend who will bring into question such unstable commitments and foundations for life.

Interacting with Wisdom

Whether defending, demonstrating or poignantly calling into question false beliefs and half-truths, every apologist needs to operate in wisdom and dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit of God. This requires us to have a well-equipped tool belt and the knowledge to know when and how to allocate the tools.

There is a running joke in our family that has been happening every Christmas for some time. Each year my father-in-law, Terry Monroe, gives me some tool for my collection so that I can fix and build stuff as needed. My father in law is probably the man I respect most in my life, but he also knows I have little current use for such things. Unlike him, I am far from Mr. Fix It or the host of Tool Time. I would rather fix a computer than roof a house, but the tools keep coming! One year he gave me a carpenter's belt. A leather contraption that holds tape measures, hammers, nails and came with some square pencils. Who knew pencils could be square? I had never seen these before. I asked if I should wear it in a fashion show or to the gym to work out or something!!! But something very different happens when Terry puts on a belt like that: hammers go in, nails fill the pockets and then some magic happens. You see the difference between Terry and me is *skill* and *wisdom*. He has been using tools and completing projects for a long time. He knows which situation requires which tool and precisely how that tool is to be used.

On the contrary, most of the time I simply have no clue. My tool belt might be full but I couldn't get much done; in fact I might just make a mess of things.²⁷

There is an analogy here to the realm of apologetics. To defend the faith we must have some good tools. We need to have knowledge and understanding of Christian theology and biblical doctrines. We need to know some good reasons why the core of our faith is true in order to defend it. We need to know why we believe what we do and how to make a case for that. We need to see the weakness in other worldviews in order to humbly question them and their assumptions. These are all great tools but to use them is a matter of *skill* and *wisdom*. This only comes with experience and the leading of the Spirit of God. Let me share an example.

Imagine for a moment that you have a friend who is going through a tough time after a family member has passed away and she asks you for the reason you believe in Jesus. Someone with a full apologetic tool belt has many options here. He could reach for a hammer and go into a detailed argument for the trustworthy nature of the New Testament based on complicated manuscript counts, repetition of the New Testament passages in the teaching of the church fathers, pontificate about uncials, reliable copying and the transmission of ancient texts. In doing this he would be using a tool but he is also being one. Wisdom would say to point to the comfort of Jesus and the hope found in the gospel. If the conversation then goes to another question we must ask God, in the moment, what the person needs to hear at this time.

Love cares about the person more than winning an argument, and wisdom gives us insight into what the person needs to hear and what they need next in the conversation in order to see Jesus for who he really is. This takes humility and prayer. Douglas Groothuis in his new textbook on Christian apologetics writes the following helpful exhortation:

If we grow in apologetic ability [read tool belt and arguments]—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...Humility embraces prayer and lives within its embrace, whether for apologetics or any other enterprise.²⁸

For anyone to engage in evangelism which is undergirded by apologetics she must have two things. First, she must be fully persuaded that the gospel is true and Jesus the only savior from sin, death and hell. Second, she must love others enough to share that very gospel with actual people in whatever context God provides. This might mean one on one with a neighbor, with groups of friends from sports teams and for some it might mean standing before large crowds of humanity. Fully persuaded of gospel truth we then seek to persuade others to repent of sin and follow Jesus. This may require the

²⁷ For those who are interested I am actually making good progress under the training of my father-in-law. I have fixed several things around the house and will soon be building a new bridge across the creek behind my house. I will be using that carpenter belt and an unused circular saw I got for Christmas a few years back. See, anyone can learn with a little effort.

²⁸ Groothuis, 38.

answering of a few questions but again, we must not mind a few questions – we just might find God in them.

THE ROAD TO THE TRUTH

We began this journey together describing our questions as breadcrumbs and clues to what is actually true about life and reality. However, a human being asking questions and seeking answers about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, and religious teachings will not be enough. You see we might seek answers but there is another who also seeks.

God himself is the author of all truth and Jesus is the embodiment of the truth. When we have our questions we need to have a divine guide to the one who is the truth. God himself has left us many clues in creation and in life and in our own questions. Yet we do not seek God on our own. The Bible teaches us that we are in rebellion and need divine illumination to actually see the truth. Jesus describes us as blind men, needing to see. He describes us as deaf men, needing to hear. He shows us that we are dead men needing to live. Our reasoning can only go so far. Romans chapters 1-3 do indeed teach us that God has left us a witness in the beauty and glory of creation and speaks to us in our consciences as human beings. From looking at the world we can know that God is good, powerful and we are accountable to him. Yet to see Jesus as the light of the knowledge of the glory of God²⁹ is a work of the Spirit in us. It arrives from light that shines upon us into the darkness of our sin, doubts and despair.

The apologist can be used in this process but only in a preliminary fashion. I once heard Ravi Zacharias describe the task of the apologist as “clearing the bushes” so that others may look to the cross without hindrance. We can follow our questions to the end of the road but we must eventually arrive at the face of Jesus the risen God. Once we do, whether we end up worshippers or continue in worthless rebellion is up to the grace of God. Once false beliefs are cleared out and objections have been met, we still must end face to face and bow the knee to Jesus. The old hymn Amazing Grace describes who guides this miracle well:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost and now I'm found
Was blind but now I see*

Once all the questions have been pressed and answers have been given, only God can make the blind see. This is what the Scriptures teach us “Wake up, O Sleeper and rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you”³⁰ for salvation is of the Lord. It is my hope that he finds you in the midst of your questions.

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:6

³⁰ Ephesians 5:14

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Reid S. Monaghan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Pastor Reid S. Monaghan

APPENDIX 1 – AN INTRODUCTION TO APOLOGETIC SYSTEMS AND THEIR PRACTITIONERS

There have been many historical approaches to the academic discipline and practice of Christian Apologetics. There are camps that have formed around philosophical approaches and various ways thinkers have approached the relationship of faith and reason. Though this cannot in any way be exhaustive I wanted to provide a summary of the various ways believers have sought to intellectually and practically defend the faith. I have done this for you by using the titles of popular songs or ways of dancing. You're welcome. After these brief descriptions will follow two figures which summarize the various views of these positions in tabular form. You're welcome again.

Classical Apologetics – Two stepping the floor

Classical apologists trace their roots back to the philosophical theology of the early church and the high day of medieval thinking. They think philosophy should serve theology but can take an active role in shaping the necessary preconditions (prolegomena) for doing good theology. Many times the classical method is called a "two step" apologetic in that it first seeks to philosophically prove or demonstrate the existence of God and then secondly, demonstrate the reality of the Christian method, its miracles and revelation in Scripture. They argue that it is hard to talk to someone about the miracle of the resurrection when they don't even believe God exists. They are not afraid to use the terminology "proving Christianity to be true."

Evidential Apologetics – Don't know much about history?

Evidential apologists think two steps are not necessary when one will do fine. This camp focuses on evidences for Christianity and makes inductive arguments based on historical facts. The evidentialists will point to fulfilled prophecy, build an historical case for the literal resurrection of Jesus and point to verifying miracles as reasons to think the Christian gospel is true. Like a good forensic specialist on CSI these dudes dig the pages of history and archaeology and point to biblical evidences that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Evidentialists love good learning history and think you should know much about it as well.

Some Reformed Approaches – Song References Below

In the reformed tradition there are actually several flavors of apologetic thinking. One unifying factor for people in this camp is that they hold the position that human reason is flawed and devastated by the fall of man into sin. They hold this for biblical and theological reasons. Due to his fallen nature man cannot reason properly so he cannot think his way into God. Fideism, which sort of means "faith only", which we will handle in a moment, has been an historical presence in the history of reformation churches. In recent times two philosophical movements have come to the fore in the reformed churches. Presuppositionalism and Reformed Epistemology. The first is theologically oriented and the latter is a move in the analytic philosophy of religion. We cover each in turn.

We want Presup, We want Presup!

Cornelius Van Til was the most prominent recent figure in advocating for this methodology in apologetics. The claim here is that the human mind and reasoning is not neutral in that man is at enmity with God. He is suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) so there is no point in “answering a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:4). We need to get over the myth of common ground and reasoning to God. Humans are not this sort of creature so we should not act as if apologetics is a friendly match of intellectual tennis where truth will simply prevail by way of reasoning. However, the presuppositionalist does find a place for rational engagement and it is on the offense. The apologist should “tear down strong-holds of unbelief” with a transcendental argument showing that the Christian faith is the only rational option. All others deconstruct. Even the use of reason collapses unless we know we can trust it. This only comes from God. So when it comes to “answering the fools folly” (Proverbs 26:5) we must expose the flaws of unbelieving thinking that set itself up against the knowledge of God. I find this a great methodology but it does not produce great historical or philosophical arguments in defense of or in favor of the faith. Thankfully there are classical and evidential apologists for that. We can borrow their tools to use in our method. Hooray!

It's my prerogative, I can believe if I can believe

In the last half of the 20th century men like William Alston of Syracuse, Nicolas Wolterstorff of Yale and St. Alvin Plantinga (sorry for my preemptive canonization of Alvin, but we do love him) of Notre Dame have made some interesting moves in the philosophy of religions. To get into it here would be either fantastically exciting or phenomenally boring. I'm going to hedge my bets and keep this short. Since the enlightenment atheistic and skeptical thinkers demanded someone be able to “prove!!!” that God exists in order to be rational in believing in him. Skeptics try to find escape clauses in arguments for God's existence so that may say “see, you didn't prove it, therefore you are a dumb-dumb for believing in God.” Or something like that. The skeptic thereby places the “burden of proof” on the theist as if unbelief is the only basic and default position. Plantinga has been making the argument³¹ that it is purely and properly basic, epistemologically speaking, to believe in God without any argument for God's existence and to do so is completely rational. One is rationally responsible to defeat arguments presented *against* belief in God and an intellectual believer should be happy to do so. Certainly St. Alvin has offered reasons to believe in God and he has shown that certain objections to God can be fully removed. His argument dealing with the problem of evil and suffering comes to mind.³²

Fideism – I gotta have faith, faith, faith

Fideism is represented well by Martin Luther's now infamous quote “Reason is the devil's whore”³³ and is entirely suspect of any project of human reasoning apart from the divine illumination of the

³¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³² Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

³³ It should be noted that Luther's ranting against reason was in a particular setting of use of reason *apart from Scripture* in the formation of theology in the Romans church. Philosophy unguided by the words of God is target here.

Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. Faith is a leap but one worth your life. After all, if faith is in GOD who is fully and entirely worth your trust, you should just flow with that. Other apologists see the fideistic position as self-refuting as you must use reason to make an argument against reason. Yet the fideist gives good warnings based upon good theology so let's listen to him that faith alone, in Christ alone, by the grace of God alone is the only thing that saves. We should give an amen.

Pragmatic – Born, in the USA, I was, born in the USA

So which is right? I think they all offer something helpful in the apologetic enterprise of the church. As a pragmatic American I think our tool belt should have a little of all of these in the mix so that the Spirit can use reasons, arguments, preaching, testimony and whatever else he chooses to bring people to faith in Christ and find the knowledge of God.

OK, enjoy the tables below.

Table 1: Meta-Apologetic Issues³⁴

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Mode	Proof	Defense	Offense	Persuasion
Ground	Reason	Fact	Revelation	Faith
Form	Rational	Empirical	Transcendental	Paradoxical
Precursors	Anselm, Aquinas	Butler, Paley	Calvin, Reid	Luther, Kierkegaard
20th Cent	CS Lewis, Geisler	Montgomery Swinburne	Van Til, Plantinga	Barth, Bloesch
God	God exists	God has acted	God speaks	God loves me
Knowledge	Internal Coherence	External coherence	Scriptural Fidelity	Fidelity to Christ
Theology	AP as Prolegomena	As Polemics	As Theology	As Persuasive Theology
Philosophy	Uses Phil Ideas	Uses Phil Tools	Confronts false Philosophy	Confronts all Phil

³⁴ Adapted from tables in Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr, *Faith Has Its Reasons, an Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 542-544.

Table 2: Apologetic Issues

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Scripture	Is the subject of AP Rationally Verified Authority of God	Source of AP Factually Verified Story about Christ	Standard for AP Self-attesting Authority of God	Story of AP Self attesting story about Christ
Religion	Disprove the Worldviews Underlying Religions	Present the unique, factual, and miraculous character of Christian Religion	Presents the antithesis between Christian and Non- Christian principles.	Explain Christian faith is not religion but relationship
God	Show that theism is the only or most rational worldview	Use various lines of argument and evidence to build a case for Theism	Show that God's existence is basic or foundational to all knowledge or proof	Explain that knowing God is a relational matter
Evil	Deductive Problem Is Theism Inconsistent?	Evidential Problem Is Theism Likely?	Theological Problem Is God Sovereign Over Evil?	Existential Problem Can God be trusted Despite Evil?
Miracles	Miracles are Possible if God exists – validate special revelation	Specific Miracles are probable – serve as evidence in Biblical History	Biblical Miracles are Prophetical – miracles are credible to those who accept Biblical authority	Miracles, internal and external are given to those who respond in faith.
Jesus	Alternative Views of Jesus cannot be rationally held	Detail evidence for Jesus' resurrection, fulfilled prophecies etc.	Jesus' claim to be God as His self- attesting Word, confirmed by Spirit	Call people to meet God's Love in Jesus

Apologetic methods are cool but they are a bit empty without developing clear thinking, sound theology, good arguments and Christian evidences for use by missional churches and believers.

In Appendix 2 I will give, ever so briefly, some important areas of knowledge that apologists must cover in our day.

APPENDIX 2 – THE CONTENT OF APOLOGETICS

The Historical Faith and Central Doctrines

Good arguments have been and continue to be developed in service of major Christian teachings and tenants. The following are but a few essential doctrines.

- ⊕ The existence, character and nature of God
- ⊕ The fully deity and full humanity of Christ
- ⊕ The bodily resurrection of Christ
- ⊕ Humanity's fallen state and guilt before God
- ⊕ Salvation is by God's grace through faith in Christ, by the substitutionary atonement of Christ
- ⊕ Belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah - great prophet, high priest, coming king.
- ⊕ The Scriptures as the Word of God which reveal to us the gospel and the aforementioned doctrines.

Important Contemporary Interactions and Frontiers

In every epoch of church history Christian Apologists must answer the questions and objections of the culture in which they travel. In the second century AD Justin Martyr interacted at great length with the Logos ideology of Greek Philosophy. I have never in my life been asked about this. I have been asked and thought a lot about the following.

- ⊕ Truth as a category – in times past most believed that truth was real, external to us and discoverable. Today many think we construct our own truths and the universe will adjust and adapt to our whims. Ideas such as epistemic relativism, moral relativism, and cultural relativism must be addressed today.
- ⊕ Concept of self and identity – modern people think of themselves as constructed by their experiences and environments while Scripture teaches that we are created in the image of God and unique in our personal identity. We have to interact today with a fluid concept of “youness” as many teach “you” are not even real but rather just an electrochemical phenomena working out in a pattern of star dust called the brain.
- ⊕ Cultural view of authority – God is the author of and owner of our lives. Yeah, Americans love that stuff. Our view of authority is that it's always suspect and bad. We are calling people to repent and trust Jesus as Lord of life. There are earthquakes that will go down here.
- ⊕ View of history and the future – Do you ever watch any sci fi movies? They hardly, if ever, include anyone who believes in God. Furthermore they are many times morbid, dark and dystopia (a really bad place) views of the future being envisioned by today's artists and story tellers. We hold that God will reign in the future and the future is bright on the earth. See a difference?
- ⊕ Science/Scripture – though a strong argument can be made that science was birthed from the Christian point of view, many today want to image a war between science and faith. Additionally, theories of micro and macro evolution and how they fit (or do not fit) with the biblical narrative must be addressed.

- ⊕ Biotechnology, Technobiology, Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience – We are working today to engineer and re-engineer life on two fronts. First, we are working in gene manipulation and therapy to heal diseases but the possibility for augmentation looms real. Such work in “wetware” has potential ethical pitfalls and interacts with what it means to be human. Second, we are also working with “hardware” and computer systems to heal and augment using mechanical means. This also raises profound issues related to justice (why do all the rich people have “super brains”) and ethics. How will we understand robot intelligence and ever more interactive machines? Are they “human?” The final issue I’ll raise in this list is in “software” and the creation of artificial intelligence. Neuroscience today can simplistically assume that the brain is a computer and that is all we are. Such mind/brain identity can subvert many aspects of Christian theology and I have already been writing on these fronts.³⁵
- ⊕ Environmental Concerns – Is technology our savior or an out of control evil which will destroy our world? Or both? Popular films like Avatar³⁶ are wrestling with these issues, as should a good Christian thinker.
- ⊕ Concerns for Universal Human Rights - what worldview grounds the existence of and the inalienable nature of universal human rights?

Pastoral Apologetics

Finally, many times issues regarding making a defense for the faith and caring for people times converge. This list is a small sampling we wrestle with today in pastoral ministry and care.

- ⊕ Sexual ethics – sex without marital trust and commitment, homosexuality, transgenderism, sexual abuse of children, pornography and sexual addiction. We both need to make a biblical case on these matters and defend that case in the public square.
- ⊕ Medical ethics – abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide are all on the table in public life.
- ⊕ Reproductive ethics – various forms of birth control, fertility treatments, surrogate motherhood, embryo care and lab based reproductive procedures which by pass fathers or mothers all must be addressed with care and answers.

The church as a whole must constantly do its thinking well to defend the faith and to commend the faith to people interacting with contemporary issues and problems. The above lists are by no means exhaustive but merely reading through them could seem exhausting. Thankfully, there are many in the body of Christ with deep expertise along every line above.

Furthermore, Jesus is the one who promised to build his church and nothing can prevail against it. Every culture has its challenges; every age has ideology that spews against the risen Son of God. It is to be expected and we are called to get on those walls and contend for the faith as we hold out the gospel of life for many more to be saved.

It is great to live today and belong to Jesus. May God raise up many great thinkers and apologists in our day. Maybe you? Maybe me?

³⁵ See two papers linked here - <http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/2011/4/28/on-human-anthropology.html>

³⁶ See my thoughts on Avatar here - <http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/2009/12/19/a-few-thoughts-on-avatar.html>

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RECOMMENDED WEB SITES

As always, we do not hold to or support every single thing written on sites which we did not produce etc. The following have helpful resources on various subjects related to the answering questions and defending the faith. I do stand by what is on Power of Change.

Christian Apologetic and Resource Ministry – www.carm.org Christian ministry dedicated to the glory of Christ and the promotion and defense of the Christian Gospel, Doctrine, and Theology.

Power of Change – www.powerofchange.org – this is my web site where I have written on various subjects theological, philosophical and apologetic. Use the categories and search box on the right to find that which you seek.

Ravi Zacharias International Ministries – www.rzim.org - Equipping this generation of Christians with a culturally relevant apologetic

Reasonable Faith – www.reasonablefaith.org is the web site of Christian philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig.

Stand to Reason – www.str.org - Stand to Reason is a ministry founded by Greg Koukl which equips Christian ambassadors with knowledge, wisdom, and character to be effective ambassadors for the Christian faith.



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