

Unapologetic Apologetics

By David Feddes

If I'm going to teach about Christian apologetics, maybe I should start by apologizing: "I'm a Christian. It's really, really hard to believe that Christianity is true, but I happen to feel that way. I can't expect you to feel that way. I wish Christianity made more sense, but sometimes you just have to ignore logic and take a leap in the dark. The Bible is a very old book, and I can see why you might find it confusing, maybe even boring. I certainly don't expect you to believe everything in it. Even though I happen to be a Christian, I can't give you any good reason to be one. I'm sorry I even bothered you and brought up the subject. I apologize, but I'm a Christian."

Hold on! I'm not being serious!

Is Christian apologetics simply apologizing for being a Christian? No, Christian apologetics is not saying "Oh, I'm so sorry. I know it sounds offensive, I know it sounds stupid, but it's just one of those weird things about me that I happen to be a Christian." The noun *apologetics* is very different from the adjective *apologetic*. The dictionary defines the adjective *apologetic* as "sorry, regretful, eager to apologize, embarrassed." Christian apologetics is not about being sorry, regretful, or embarrassed about your Christian faith.

What is Christian Apologetics?

According to the dictionary, the noun *apologetics* means "the branch of theology concerned with the defense and rational justification of Christianity." We believe Christianity to be true, we believe that it makes good sense to be a Christian, and apologetics is showing how it makes sense. John Frame says, "Christian apologetics is a field of Christian theology that aims to present a rational basis for the Christian faith, defend the faith against objections, and expose the perceived flaws of other world views." Far from being sorry and apologetic for being a Christian, apologetics is about defending the faith and showing how Christianity makes more sense than its competitors.

Barriers to Belief

There are various barriers to belief. Here are a few that apologetics sometimes deals with.

A person might say, "Is there any evidence that God is real? I don't see any evidence. I don't see God; I don't hear him; I don't feel him. I see no reason to believe God is real."

Another might say, "Isn't faith unscientific, wishful thinking? It isn't connected to reality. You just believe whatever you want to believe and what makes you feel good."

Someone may object, "Miracles? Those are impossible. We know there are laws of nature. Miracles would violate the laws of nature, so how could anybody believe in miracles?"

One of the most common barriers is pain: "How could a good, all powerful God allow so much suffering in the world? There can't be a good explanation for that."

Other people ask, “Aren’t all the major religions pretty much alike? Aren’t the founders of those religions very similar? Didn’t they all have the same goal in the end? Why would you want to pick Christianity as better than some other religion?”

Some folks insist that there are many ways to God and salvation. They wonder, “Isn’t it arrogant to see Jesus as the only way?”

Another may say, “Why become a Christian when so many churchgoers are hypocrites?”

The list of challenges and objections could go on and on. One aspect of apologetics is to listen to the complaints, questions, and barriers that people have. Then, having listened carefully, we can try to help them deal with those things and give them reasons to believe.

Bold Brilliance

As we think about apologetics, we’re not going to be apologetic about it. I want to talk about unapologetic apologetics. In Scripture we see that Jesus, when he talked with opponents, would stump them. “Marveling at his answer, they became silent... they no longer dared to ask him any question.” (Luke 20: 26, 40) Sometimes Jesus would give such a good answer that they would be stunned. At other times he would answer a question with a question that put them on the spot. Jesus was a brilliant conversationalist. He could stump those who tried to trap him.

Jesus’ followers were also bold and brilliant in speaking the gospel to others. Even though they were fishermen, even though they didn’t have a formal education, they astounded their opponents when they spoke about Jesus. Peter declared, “‘There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). That was the key: Jesus’ boldness and brilliance had rubbed off on them. Another Christian, Stephen, got into a discussion with some very educated and knowledgeable people. “They could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10).

True, Reasonable, Powerful

So we’re not apologetic but bold in presenting the faith. We show that it’s true, reasonable, and powerful. The apostle Paul was speaking to the Roman governor Festus. The governor listened for a while, but when Paul started talking about Jesus’ resurrection, Festus thought it was the craziest thing he’d ever heard. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” How did Paul respond? He said, very respectfully, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable” (Acts 26:24-25). That is apologetics. You’re saying that something is true, and you’re saying that it’s reasonable.

Paul was not embarrassed to speak of Jesus. He said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”(Romans 1:16). Paul wrote this to the city of Rome, the capital of the world’s dominant culture. Paul himself was often harassed, often mocked, often thrown into prison. He was part of a tiny minority who believed this Christian

message. Some might have wondered if Paul was embarrassed to believe such nonsense. But Paul was not ashamed. He said, in effect, “I will preach to the most powerful city on earth and say that I’m not ashamed of the gospel because it’s God’s power to save everyone who believes.”

Paul also told his fellow believers, “Walk in wisdom towards outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:5-6). Apologetics is being able to gently, respectfully, and intelligently answer a person who’s an outsider, and helping that person to learn the truth of the faith.

Is Apologetics Wrong?

Some Christians agree that we shouldn’t be apologetic or embarrassed about believing the gospel truth, but they still say that we shouldn’t get involved in apologetics, defending and reasoning and arguing for the faith. These Christians aren’t ashamed of the gospel, and they’re eager to witness boldly, but they don’t think that Christians should resort to reasoning and evidence. Christians should simply proclaim God’s truth from Scripture, plainly and boldly, confident that the gospel has power and that God will accomplish his purpose through the gospel. They say that giving evidence for Christianity is at best useless, and at worst wrong and harmful.

Let’s think about that. Is apologetics wrong? Some Christians say that apologetics depends too much on human reasoning, not divine revelation. They say that we cannot know the things of God simply by reasoning our way up to him; we need God to reveal himself. This is true. We cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us. But is it necessarily true that all apologetics depends entirely on human reasoning? I’m teaching a course in apologetics, I’m talking about apologetics, so I obviously don’t believe that all apologetics is bad. Still, I admit that there can be a danger of relying too much on merely human ways of thinking and not enough on what God has revealed.

Here’s another objection of some Christians to apologetics: Evidence and argument treat God as a theory for debate or as a thing for analysis, not as a Person to be trusted and adored. Don’t make God just some theory or thing. God is not just an idea to be debated. He’s not just an insect that you can dissect and look at the different parts and analyze. He’s God! He’s alive! He’s personal! He’s to be adored. He calls you to put your faith in him. Some Christians who oppose apologetics say that it gets people on the wrong track right away because it treats God as just an uncertain theory to be discussed, or just a thing to be scrutinized, rather than an overwhelming, personal reality. I agree that there is danger in treating God as just a theory or a thing, and we shouldn’t do that. But there may be approaches to apologetics that don’t require us to do that.

Another objection to apologetics is that debates about God can inflate pride and make a human the judge of God. A bad starting point can’t lead to a good result. According to this objection, if you try to persuade a person that God is real and that the person should respond to God, you’re in a sense setting that person up as the judge with authority to decide. Instead, you need to let them know that God is their judge. They’re not the ones who get to sit around and decide whether God is acceptable to them.

These are objections that some Christians raise against apologetics, and I don't deny the dangers. We need to make sure that we don't depend just on human argument, that we don't treat God as a thing, that we don't become proud of our brain power, and that we don't encourage anyone to be the proud, rationalistic judge of whether God is worth believing in. Nonetheless, while recognizing the dangers, I don't believe that apologetics is wrong. The Bible shows people engaging in apologetics. Should we just preach the gospel, and let God do the rest? Well, by all means, do preach the gospel and do rely on God, but sometimes it's helpful to give people reasons and to help them deal with objections and questions that they struggle with.

Is Evidence Useless?

Some Christians believe presenting evidence for Christianity is a waste of time. They think it's useless to debate someone with a non-Christian worldview because that person has ideas that are rooted in ungodly heart commitments and in basic assumptions about reality. These basic assumptions are sometimes called presuppositions. Such Christians insist that evidence can't help somebody with bad presuppositions, a wrong worldview, and an ungodly heart. The person has to be born again; no amount of evidence can make that happen. Besides, trying to present evidence that makes sense to an unbelieving worldview might give unbelievers the impression that if they convert, they can keep their worldview mostly intact and just add Jesus to it. But what they really need is radical rebirth, a new heart, new presuppositions, and a new worldview. These Christians say that any attempt to offer evidence is useless or even harmful.

There is much truth in this perspective. I believe that there are deep presuppositions that people hold, assumptions that they don't even realize that they hold, that they just take for granted. Those sometimes need to be uncovered and dealt with. I also believe that one of the biggest obstacles to faith is having an ungodly heart commitment. It's a mistake to assume that if only someone were given the right explanation and the best evidence, all would be well. There are ungodly heart commitments, hidden assumptions, and deep-seated worldviews. Radical rebirth is absolutely necessary. Even so, in some cases evidence can be helpful. At times we must confront presuppositions, but at times we can also deal with evidence.

Giving Evidence, Reasoning, Defending

The Bible speaks of Christians giving evidence and reasoning with people. "Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3). There in Thessalonica, Paul was talking with Jewish people who believe the Old Testament Scriptures, so he was using portions from their own Scriptures to show that Jesus had to suffer and rise again.

Paul reasoned with others besides Jews, and he used other evidence in addition to the Scriptures. In Athens Paul "reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). In Corinth Paul "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). In Ephesus Paul was "reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God." He was "reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:8-9). This was a non-Jewish lecture hall, where Paul tried to reason and persuade people. So Paul reasoned with people not only in places

of worship, but also in markets and lecture halls. When Paul spoke of Jesus' resurrection he didn't just proclaim it; he argued for it. He stated that hundreds of eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus were still alive and could testify about what they had seen (1 Corinthians 15:4-8). Paul was giving rational evidence that Jesus is alive, namely, lots of eyewitness testimony.

The apostle Peter wrote, "But in your heart, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15-16). The phrase "make a defense" is a translation of the Greek word *apologia*. Always be ready for apologetics. Be ready to explain the reason for the hope that you have and do it with the right kind of attitude, with gentleness and respect. That's genuine apologetics: giving reasons for your hope, and doing it in a manner that is kindly and winsome.

Four Elements of Unapologetic Apologetics

Unapologetic apologetics has at least four elements that I want to highlight: dialogue, defense, clarification, and making a positive case.

Dialogue includes talking together, reasoning together, listening and learning to talk another person's language. Part of communicating the gospel is speaking in the language, and in the figures of speech, and with the examples that other people can understand and relate to. In order to relate to other people, you need conversation with them. You need to understand how they think in order to communicate how you think. Dialogue, talking back and forth in an effort to understand each other, is a big part of apologetics.

Defense deals with obstacles and objections that might keep people from taking Christianity seriously. Some people long ago thought Christianity was immoral or illogical, and some still believe this today. For example, they say Christianity is immoral because it teaches that sex is only between a married man and woman. That is so narrow, so bigoted, so intolerant, and it's immoral to be narrow, bigoted, and intolerant. There can be many other barriers to belief as well, such as those we saw earlier. If people think Christianity doesn't fit the laws of morality or logic, we may seek to defend the faith by addressing the obstacles and the objections.

Clarification is another key element of apologetics. Sometimes we need to clarify and correct misunderstandings that people have about the faith. Back in the early centuries of the church, Christians were charged with being atheists, with being cannibals, with being anarchists and traitors who wanted to overthrow the government. They were accused of being atheists because they didn't believe in all the different gods and goddesses that many Greeks and Romans believed in. Christian apologists explained that they were not atheists but believed in the one God who created all things. Christians were accused of being cannibals: it was rumored that they ate human flesh and blood, that they drank the blood of babies and ate baby flesh. Christian apologists explained that they took part in something called the Lord's Supper, but this didn't involve murdering babies and chewing their flesh and drinking their blood. They explained that this was a memorial and a participation in their Savior who died and rose again, and they actually ate bread and drank wine, not the bodies of murdered babies. When Christians were accused of

being anarchists who wanted to get rid of all government, Christian apologists again clarified things. They said, “We don’t worship the government, we don’t worship the emperor, but we’re not encouraging anybody to overthrow the government or the emperor. We pray for those who are in authority over us. We encourage people to give honor to those who deserve honor. We encourage them to pay the taxes they owe.”

Still today there are many misunderstandings of Christianity, many things that apologists need to clarify and correct. Here’s a recent example of clarification. On a trip to Africa, I visited a place which displayed various statues of gods that were worshiped. There was a god of thunder, a god of this, a god of that. Then the guide said, “Here’s the Holy Trinity. That statue is God the Father, that statue is Mary, his wife, and that statue is their son Jesus. That’s the Holy Trinity.” But that is not the Holy Trinity. In the first place, the Trinity is not three statues, because God is spirit. In the second place, Mary is not the second person of the Trinity. There have been times when Christians were misunderstood as teaching something like this as the Trinity. So if a Muslim heard that this was what Christians believed about the Trinity, the Muslim would say, “I don’t believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. I don’t believe that the Father and Mary had a baby together, or that those are the three persons of the Trinity.” A Christian apologist would say, “I agree with you. If that was what the Trinity meant, I wouldn’t believe the Trinity either. But that’s not what Trinity is. Mary is not the second person of the Trinity, and the Father did not have physical relations with her. The Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” When Christian teachings are badly misunderstood, apologists must clarify.

Making a positive case is a fourth key element of apologetics. This involves helping people to take Christianity seriously and giving them reasons to believe. One kind of positive case is giving various evidences, such as evidence of design in creation, evidence of Jesus’ resurrection, or evidence of the Bible’s accuracy from archeology or manuscripts.

For a time, some people were so skeptical about the Bible accounts of Jesus that they wouldn’t even believe a real person named Jesus ever existed. Others would say, “We have no record whatsoever that anybody named Pontius Pilate was ever the governor of Judea. We think the Bible is just wrong about that. Pontius Pilate is not mentioned in any Roman records. There is no evidence at all.” An apologist could say, “There are many people for whom we don’t have any evidence or written records anymore. Pontius Pilate lived 2000 years ago. Not everybody who lived 2000 years ago left a trail of evidence that made it to the present time.” That is one way of arguing: there are many people who didn’t leave any archaeological artifacts behind. In this particular case, though, the apologist’s job suddenly got easier. Some people were digging and found a monument with a stone inscription that said “Pontius Pilatus” on it. We literally have his name written in stone from the time that he was governor in Judea. Where such evidence exists, it is helpful for an apologist to be aware of it.

Here’s another example. Some scholars claimed the gospel of John was not written by an eyewitness but by someone writing 200 years after Jesus. The theology in John was highly developed and was treating Jesus as God from the very first sentence, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, the Word was God.” According to these scholars, Jesus’ first-century followers wouldn’t say he was God, so that couldn’t possibly be written by Jesus’ dear friend, John. It had to be written a few hundred years later when Christians were making up this

stuff about Jesus being God. Then a fragment of the gospel of John was found in Egypt, dating from the year 125. This means that by 125 AD the gospel of John was already considered Scripture, and copies of it had already spread to Egypt. So the gospel of John itself must have been written considerably earlier than that. We have proof positive that John's gospel was written much, much earlier than many skeptics once thought, and that its high theology of Jesus as God was taught in the first century.

Another aspect of making a positive case is coherence. How well do things fit together? The truths of Christianity hold together and are consistent with each other and not self-contradictory. They hold together with other things we know about reality. They make sense of a lot of things.

Also, there is explanatory power. The truth that God created everything and that he created our minds, for instance, gives a reason to believe that our minds can form beliefs that correspond to the way things are in the world outside our minds. If you believe that the mind is a randomly evolved blob of tissue, the brain, and that's all it is, with electrons firing randomly, you have no reason to have any confidence in the mind. Christianity, with its doctrine of creation, explains confidence in the human mind much better than the evolutionary alternative does. That's an example of making an argument from the explanatory power of Christianity.

Those are four important elements of apologetics: dialoguing, defending, clarifying, and making a positive case for the truth of the Christian faith.

Dangers in Apologetics

In all of this, we need to realize that there are dangers in apologetics. Some Christians say we shouldn't get into apologetics at all, but even if we see value in apologetics, we should beware of dangers.

As we try to dialogue, defend, clarify, and present a positive case, we might try to change the biblical gospel to suit a person's preferences or current trends. When we tailor the gospel in this way, it might seem more believable, but it's not worth believing. In trying to fit the truth of the Bible to match people's preferences, we may betray the truth of God's Word. For instance, some people try to interpret the first chapters of Genesis in a way that fits perfectly with Darwinian evolution. That may make the Bible more believable to people who are serious evolutionists. But what if evolution is false? Then we've just sold out and betrayed God's truth.

Skilled apologists may be tempted to pride and intellectual arrogance toward non-Christians or believers with simple faith. If you're smart and know a lot, there's the temptation to think you're better than others and say, "Oh, they just believe it on faith, but I know my stuff, I'm so superior." The Lord does not want us to use apologetics to puff up a sense of superiority.

Here's another danger of apologetics, especially if you're a skilled apologist: it's deadly to rest faith on mere human arguments. The apostle Paul said he wanted people's faith to rest not on man's wisdom but on God's power (1 Corinthians 2:5). Christianity is not just knowing lots of facts; Christianity is knowing Christ. One of the great apologists of the 1900s, C. S. Lewis, said that it is dangerous to be successful as an apologist:

No doctrine of the Faith seems to me so unreal as the one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments... into the Reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ himself.

Just when Lewis won a debate, that article of faith seemed unreal to him. When you are a Christian, you must rest in Christ, not in your own arguments. You may argue briefly and temporarily to help somebody else take Christianity more seriously. But as you do so, you must keep in mind that you depend entirely on Christ. Beware when you're succeeding as an apologist. Always fall back from your arguments into the reality of Jesus.

Blaise Pascal was another person who, like Lewis, was extremely brilliant and presented some excellent arguments for the Christian faith. However, said Pascal, "We only know God through Jesus Christ. The Christian's God does not merely consist of a God who is the Author of mathematical truths and the order of the elements. That is the notion of the heathen... the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation." A danger of apologetics is to turn God into some sort of rational machine or some sort of formula, so that what you end up proving is not really the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. We must always recognize the limits of apologetics, and we must always recognize the real God whom we love and belong to.

The Value of Apologetics

Let me just mention two very simple ways that apologetics can be valuable. First, it helps some non-Christians to take Christian claims more seriously. They may have hard questions or objections that, they think, prove Christianity can't be true. If you can show those questions and objections to be solvable and show that they're not a problem after all, then the barrier is out of the way, and you can take Christian claims more seriously.

A second benefit of apologetics is that it helps some Christians to remain confident in the face of challenges. If you're a new Christian and you hear some brilliant atheist or some smart person from another religion attacking Christianity, you might still hold on to Christ, but you might feel a bit shaken. Your mind might get dizzy and disoriented, because you're not sure how to answer such challenges. Someone gifted in apologetics can show you answers and help you to remain confident in the face of those challenges.

Limits of Apologetics

While apologetics can be of help to some non-Christians as well as some Christians, it's important to know the limits of apologetics.

Often the very best arguments and evidence won't persuade someone. There are many people, no matter how well you use apologetics, who won't find the evidence persuasive. If they're to be won to faith in Christ, it will be by something besides mere apologetics.

Here's another fact to keep in mind: most people become Christians without a lot of help from apologetics. Some people accept the faith if you just share your personal testimony and direct them to the Bible. They hear gospel truth, the power of God seizes them, and they trust in Jesus. Apologetics may have nothing to do with their conversion. That's not to say apologetics is bad; it's just to say not everybody needs apologetics to become a Christian.

Direct encounter with God is better than all the apologetic evidence anyone can muster. When you hear God's Word and his Spirit comes to you, you may sense his reality and his presence. When you have that kind of a direct encounter, you don't need further proof. After all, when you and a friend are talking together in the same room, you don't need proofs that your friend is real. He's there, and you know it, and you're interacting with him. Likewise, if you have a relationship with the living God and he has impressed his reality on you, you don't need some logical argument or evidence to show you God is real. God himself has shown you he's real, and that's good enough. In fact, it's far better than belief based on evidence and inference.

Here's another limit of apologetics: it takes place mostly in the realm of analysis and speculation, and the logic of speculative thought differs from the logic of personal relations. We who are Christians know God through personal acquaintance, and we delight in Him. But in apologetic discussion, we're often dealing with the other person's way of seeing things and with what they find persuasive. To them God may be a doubtful hypothesis, not a living reality. Knowledge by personal acquaintance and delight in God are hard to convey in a debate. Sometimes just telling them how you've encountered God might help them, but sometimes it might not. At any rate, the logic of apologetics and debate is quite different from the logic of a rich relationship with God. Don't be afraid to use either or both together, depending on the situation. If a person seems open to evidence and arguments, use your apologetics. If the person is open to your personal testimony and experience of God, share your testimony. Don't feel you always have to limit yourself to apologetics, and don't feel you always have to avoid apologetics.

To Answer or Not to Answer?

Apologetics is helpful in some cases but not all. There are limits. So when should we answer? When shouldn't we? The Bible says, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself." The very next sentence says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Proverbs 26: 4-5). Well, which is it? Do I answer, or don't I?

It depends on the person and on the situation. Suppose a person lacks knowledge of God and doesn't even know how much he doesn't know. Then you have to decide whether, in trying to answer him, you're going to become more foolish like him, or whether he's going to feel wise in his own eyes if you don't have an answer for him. Sometimes a non-Christian will go around thinking he's intellectually superior because nobody has ever answered his objections to faith. If you can poke a hole in that notion by showing that Christians have good reasons for what they believe, then you've answered the fool according to his folly; he might not be quite so wise in his own eyes, and he may have to take Christianity seriously. On the other hand, beware of becoming like a fool yourself. Don't start changing your gospel to suit him.

Some of the worst heresies in Christianity have come from apologists who were trying to make the faith more believable to a non-Christian but ended up making the faith more non-Christian. Friedrich Schleiermacher was a founder of theological liberalism, which rejected many miracles and much else that is vital to the Christian gospel. He developed his ideas in the name of making Christianity appeal to its cultured despisers. He answered the fools according to their folly, but he became a fool himself, theologically.

Answer when you think it will help and when the other person seems open to the truth. Don't answer if the other person isn't open or willing to learn, or if you find yourself sliding into their worldview and starting to reshape your Christianity to suit them.

The Life Giver

Apologetics doesn't save anybody. Only God saves. There may be a role for apologetics, so do what you can, as God directs you. But remember that only the Lord gives life. I once heard someone compare apologetics to the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." ... So they took away the stone... Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:39-44)

In that story, notice what the people do, and what they can't do. Before Lazarus comes to life, they take away the stone when Jesus tells them to. After Lazarus comes to life, they set him free from the burial clothes that are still binding him. But they don't bring Lazarus to life. They don't say, "Lazarus, come out." Only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus can raise the dead to life.

So it is with apologetics. We cannot make fallen, dead souls come to life. Only the Lord can do that. But maybe we can take away a stone here or there, and maybe we can take off some grave clothes here or there. Apologetics can remove a barrier or objection that blocks a non-Christian from hearing Jesus' life-giving voice. Apologetics can take away a stone, but only the Lord can call the person from the deadness of sin and unbelief into the life of faith. In apologetics we're only moving a stone; we're not giving life. That is up to Jesus. Also, after the Lord has brought someone to life and faith, we can sometimes use apologetics to help a new Christian. After coming to faith, new Christians may have questions and hang-ups that still haunt them and hinder them, like the grave clothes that still bound Lazarus when he first came to life. Apologetics can unbind new believers from the grave clothes of lingering intellectual hindrances.

As we engage in Christian apologetics, let's pray that God will direct us in rolling away a stone here and there so that non-Christians can hear the Lord's voice. Let's pray that God will direct us in removing some bothersome grave clothes here and there so that new Christians can move ahead in freedom and confidence. Let's pray above all that the Lord of life will do what only he can do, that he will call people we are trying to reach and say: "Come forth, and live!"

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Slide Contents

Is Christianity embarrassing?

- *apologetic (adjective)* sorry, regretful, eager to apologize, embarrassed
- *apologetics (noun)* the branch of theology concerned with the defense and rational justification of Christianity
- Christian apologetics is a field of Christian theology that aims to present a rational basis for the Christian faith, defend the faith against objections, and expose the perceived flaws of other world views. (John Frame)

Barriers to belief

- Is there any evidence that God is real?
- Isn't faith unscientific, wishful thinking?
- Aren't miracles impossible?
- How could a good, all-powerful God allow so much suffering?
- Aren't all major religions alike?
- Isn't it arrogant to see Jesus as *the* way?
- Why become a Christian when so many churchgoers are hypocrites?

Bold brilliance

- Jesus outwitted opponents: "Marveling at his answer they became silent... they no longer dared to ask him any question. (Luke 20:26,40)
- Unschooled Peter and John amazed enemies with clear, bold proclamation. (Acts 4:13)
- They could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking. (Acts 6:10)

True, reasonable, powerful

- "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable." (Acts 26:25).
- For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. (Rom 1:16)
- Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col 4:5-6)

Is apologetics wrong?

Some Christians attack apologetics and say:

- Apologetics depends too much on human reasoning, not divine revelation.
- Evidence and argument treat God as a theory for debate or a thing for analysis, not as a Person to be trusted and adored.
- Debates about God can inflate pride and make a human the judge of God. A bad starting point can't lead to good result.
- Preach the gospel! Let God do the rest.

Is evidence useless?

Some Christians avoid apologetics and say:

- It's useless to debate someone with a non-Christian worldview, whose ideas are rooted in ungodly heart commitments and hidden assumptions ("presuppositions").
- We should not give unbelievers the impression that if they convert, they can keep their worldview mostly intact and just add Jesus to it. They need radical rebirth: new heart, new presuppositions, new worldview.

Giving evidence

"Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3).

"He reasoned in the synagogue...as well as in the marketplace day by day" (17:17).

Reasoning and persuading

- "He reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4).
- "...reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God... reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:8-9).
- Paul argued for Jesus' resurrection. He stated that hundreds of eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus were still living and could testify about what they had seen. (1 Cor 15)

Ready to make a defense

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make a defense (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness

and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Unapologetic Apologetics

- **Dialogue:** reason together (listen and learn to talk their language)
- **Defense:** remove obstacles and objections (e.g. Christianity is not immoral or illogical)
- **Clarification:** correct misunderstandings (e.g. not atheists, cannibals, or anarchists)
- **Positive case:** reasons to believe (e.g. evidence, coherence, explanatory power)

Dangers of Apologetics

- As we try to dialogue, defend, clarify, and present a positive case, we might try to change the biblical gospel to suit a person's preferences or current trends. It might seem more believable, but it's not worth believing
- Skilled apologists may be tempted to pride and intellectual arrogance toward non-Christians or believers with simple faith.
- It's deadly to rest faith on mere human arguments. Christianity is knowing Christ.

Beware of success!

No doctrine of the Faith seems to me so unreal as the one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments... into the Reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ himself. (C.S. Lewis)

Personal God of love, not a formula or machine

We only know God through Jesus Christ. The Christian's God does not merely consist of a God who is the Author of mathematical truths and the order of the elements. That is the notion of the heathen... the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation. (Pascal)

Value of Apologetics

- Helps some non-Christians to take Christian claims more seriously.
- Helps some Christians to remain confident in the face of challenges.

Limits of Apologetics

- Often the best arguments don't persuade.
- Most people become Christians without much help from apologetics.
- Belief based on direct encounter is best and does not require further proof.
- Logic of speculative thought differs from logic of personal relations. Knowledge by personal acquaintance and delight in God are hard to convey in a debate.

To answer or not to answer?

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4-5)

- Answer when you think it will help and the person is open to truth.
- Don't answer if it's just a messy quarrel, or if you're sliding into their worldview.

Only the Lord gives life.

Do what you can, as He directs.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." ... So they took away the stone... Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:39-44)

- Apologetics can remove obstacles and prepare for the moment God gives life.
- Apologetics can unbind Christians who are still haunted or hindered by tough questions.