

CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS - AN INTRODUCTION

by Rick Wade

Rick Wade's introductory guide to Christian apologetics, focusing on foundational principles of defending faith through logical reasoning, evidence, and persuasive presentation.

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Introduction

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been called upon to explain why we believe what we believe. The apostle Paul spoke of his ministry as "the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Peter said we need to "be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you." This activity of the church came to be known as apologetics which means "defense." But, if it is important that we defend the faith, how do we do it? In this essay I will not provide a lot of evidences and arguments. I will rather look at some basic principles that will guide us in defending the faith. We will talk about our starting point and about the important matter of thinking logically. We'll look at the specific charge of elitism which is prevalent on college campuses today. Finally, we'll deal with the question of presenting a case for Christianity.

So, what is apologetics, anyway, and what is it supposed to do? Apologetics has been defined as "the science and art of defending the faith." It is chiefly concerned with the question of the truth of Jesus Christ. In the days of the Greeks, when someone was summoned to court to face a charge, he would present an "apology" or a defense. For Christians, this might mean answering the question, "Why do you believe that Jesus is God?" or a question more often heard today, "Why do you think Christians have the truth?"

So, apologetics is first of all defense. It has come to include more than just defense, however. Not only is the truth of our beliefs an issue, but also the beliefs others hold. A second task of apologetics is to challenge other people to defend their beliefs. A third task of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. One might call this task "proving" Christianity (although the matter of proof must be qualified). If this seems to be too ambitious a goal, we might speak simply of persuading people of the truth of the biblical message. In all of this our goal is to let the light of God's truth shine in all its brilliance. It is our ambition also to bring unbelievers to a recognition of the truth of Jesus Christ and to persuade them to put their faith in Him.

Apologetics is typically a response to a specific question or challenge, either stated outright or just implied. Paul reasoned with the Jews for whom the cross was a stumbling block, "explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead." In the second century, apologists defended not only Christian beliefs but also Christians themselves against such charges as atheism and cannibalism and being threats to the state. In the Medieval era, more attention was given to the challenges of Judaism and Islam. In the era of the Enlightenment, apologists had to defend Christianity against the narrow confines of scientific rationalism. Today the challenge has shifted again, this time from attacks on specific doctrines to the question of whether Christianity has any claim to final truth at all.

Like our forebears, we must answer the challenges of our day. We must respond to our contemporaries' questions as difficult and uncomfortable as that might be.

Thinking Well

One of my frustrations in studying apologetics has been trying to master the overwhelming number of questions and challenges, on the one hand, and supporting evidences and reasons, on the other. Although it behooves us all to master some of these, it seems to me that it is just as important to learn how to think well.

Learning to think well, or logically, is important for Christians for several reasons. It helps us put together the various pieces of our faith to form a cohesive whole. It helps us make decisions in everyday life when the Bible doesn't speak directly to a particular issue. We must learn to deduce true beliefs or proper courses of action from what we do know from Scripture.

Good, logical thinking is especially important for an apologist. On the one hand, it can help prevent us from putting together shoddy arguments for what we believe. On the other hand, it helps us evaluate the beliefs of those who challenge Christianity. Too often we stumble at criticisms which sound good, but which really stand on logically shaky legs. Let's consider a few examples.

Here's a basic one. How do you respond to someone who says, "There's no such thing as absolute truth"? If the individual really thinks there is no absolute truth that is, truth that stands for all people at all times, that person at best can only say "In my opinion, there's no such thing as absolute truth." To say "There's no such thing as absolute truth" is to state an absolute; the statement refutes itself.

Here's another one. You've heard people say, "All religions really teach the same thing." Oh, really? Ours teaches that Jesus is God in flesh; other religions say that He isn't. A logical principle called the law of non-contradiction says that Jesus can't both be God and not be God.

Let's try one more. Some people say, "I can't believe in Christ. Look at all the terrible things Christians have done through the centuries." How would you answer this objection? While it is true that what Christians do influences non-Christians' responses to the gospel, such actions have nothing to do with whether Christianity itself is true. If part of the gospel message was that once a person becomes a Christian that person absolutely will never sin again, the objector would have grounds for questioning the truth of the faith. But the Bible doesn't say that. We can agree that Christians shouldn't do terrible things to other people, but what people did in fourteenth-century Europe or do in twentieth-century America in the name of Jesus can't change the reality of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The person making this argument may not like what Christians have done, but this complaint has no logical force against the truth of Christ. When people present arguments against the faith, we need to discern whether what they say is both factually true and logically sound. Often the objections we hear are neither. Learning how to think logically ourselves will enable us to spot fallacies in others' thinking. Perhaps pointing these out (in a gentle way, if possible) will cause the person to rethink his or her position. At least it will defuse the attack on our faith.

Answering The Charge of Elitism

I've been talking about the importance of logical thinking in doing apologetics. Now I'd like to apply that in considering a charge currently being made against Christians, especially on college campuses. In a video I recently saw, a young woman said the notion that Christians have the only truth is "elitist." She was saying that since there are so many different beliefs in the world, how can any one group of people claim to have the only truth? She, and many others like her, consider such thinking arrogant.

How can we respond to this charge? First, notice the name-calling. We are charged with "elitism." The real issue is passed over in favor of a put-down. This is just another example of how ideas and issues are dealt with in our society these days. It is important, however, not to react in kind. Too often in our society the battles over issues and ideas are fought with name-calling and sloganeering. This is unbecoming to Christians and unprofitable in apologetics and evangelism. We need to deal with the ideas themselves.

Second, Christians can acknowledge that non-Christians can know truth and that other religions can include some truth. If they didn't, they would find very few adherents. They fail, though, on such fundamental issues as the identity of Jesus and the way to be reconciled to God.

Third, notice the faulty logic in the argument. What does the reality of many points of view have to do with the truth-value of any of them? This is like saying: "Some men think they should treat their wives with the same respect they desire; some ignore their wives; others think it's okay to beat them. Who's to say only one way can be right?" The structure of the argument is the same, but it is obvious that the conclusion is wrong. A critic might understandably question our assurance that what we believe is the final truth given that there are so many people who disagree. But it is faulty logic to conclude that no beliefs can claim final truth simply because there are so many of them. Fourth, since the criticism rests upon the idea that two or more conflicting beliefs can be true, we must challenge this assumption. It can be shown to be incorrect by looking to everyday experience. If my wife says it is raining outside but my son says it isn't, do I take my umbrella or not? It can't be both raining and not raining at the same time. Likewise, if one person says Jesus is the only way to salvation and another says He isn't, no more than one of them can be correct.

Some people, of course, will challenge the notion that our knowledge of God is like knowing whether it is raining outside. God is not a part of nature; He is "wholly other." This issue is much too involved to develop here. But I believe that this thinking is fundamentally a prejudice against authoritative revelation. God has spoken, and He has given us evidence in this world to confirm what He has said. This challenge to Christianity and many others like it are not easy to deal with. But if defending the faith means responding to the challenges of our day, we must prepare ourselves, as difficult as it may be. Otherwise, we can't expect to be heard. The Case for Christianity Part 1

Earlier I wrote that one of the tasks of apologetics is to present a case for the truth of the biblical message. Now I'd like to present a few foundational considerations, and after that we'll look at how we might construct a case. When Christians are called upon to present a case for the faith, they are, in effect, being asked to offer proof that Christianity is true. What evidences or arguments can be marshaled to establish the truth of what we believe?

What we would like to do is make a case which no person of reasonable intelligence can fail to accept. But the Bible acknowledges the reality that many people will not believe no matter how compelling the evidence. Remember the story in Luke 16 about the rich man who died and suffered torment? He begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers about what they also faced. Listen to the response. Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." A determined will can ignore the best of evidence.

Unless we are talking about proof in the mathematical sense, we need to note that proof is person-relative; what will convince one person might not convince another. This doesn't mean, however, that Christianity only becomes true when someone is convinced. It's true whether anyone believes it or not. In making a case for the faith we seek to present a sound argument which will be persuasive for a particular listener. On the one hand, this consideration frees us from the responsibility of having an argument which will convince everyone; on the other hand, it means that we must not depend upon "one-size-fits-all" arguments.

Even if we're able to deal adequately with the challenges of a given individual, we need to also note what the real basis of our belief is. A true knowledge of God is based upon divine testimony which is accepted by faith, but which is also confirmed for us by evidences of various types. The testimony of Scripture about such matters as the work of Christ on the cross and justification by faith are things which can't be proved; they are accepted by faith.

We must also remember the nature of our message. Christianity is not just a system of beliefs, but rather the message of the One who is truth. This is an especially pertinent point today, given the mentality of the younger generations. Today we've lost the confidence in our ability to reason through the major issues of life in a disinterested, scientific manner and come to firm conclusions. Conceptual schemes that don't touch us where we really live hold little interest anymore. We need to draw people to Jesus who is the answer to the major questions of life. Christianity is living truth, and it should be preached and defended as such.

We might only be able to convince the non-believer that Christianity is plausible or believable. But that's a good start; often it takes many steps for a person to come to faith. Our job is to provide a solid intellectual foundation to make those steps sure. The Case for Christianity Part 2

Now we'll finish our discussion by outlining a way of presenting a case for Christianity. Note that this is just an outline; it'll be up to you to fill in the details.

Since God created the universe and is active in His creation, there is no lack of evidence for the truth of Christianity. When I use the word "evidence," I'm using it in a broad way to include not only factual evidence, but logical arguments and human experience as well. Evidence is anything that can be brought to bear on the truth-claims of Scripture. As we present evidence, we must be aware that the false presuppositions unbelievers hold about God, man, and the world might skew their evaluation of the evidences. In fact, the idea of encouraging people to evaluate Christianity makes some people uneasy. Are we allowing sinful people to bring God to the bar of judgment? No, we aren't. We are simply recognizing that, although the Bible never hints that anyone is justified in rejecting its message, it does present witnesses to the truth, typically through historical reminders and miracles. Further, because unbelievers are made in God's image and live in God's

world, they have some understanding of the truth, and we can appeal to that understanding.

We can divide the kinds of evidence at our disposal into three categories: fact (or empirical evidence); reason (or logical thinking); and experience (or human nature and the experience of life).

These three kinds of evidence can be used two ways: evaluation and explanation.

First, we can look for evidence in a given area which confirms Scripture. This is the evaluation aspect of apologetics. So, for example, we can ask, Are there observable facts which affirm what Scripture teaches? Consider history and archeology. Are the teachings of Scripture coherent and logically consistent? Yes, they are. Typically, people who say there are contradictions in the Bible have a hard time remembering one. Is what the Bible says about human nature and human experience true to what we know? Yes it is; we can identify with biblical characters. The second way we use evidences is to see if Christianity can explain them. The following questions might clarify what I mean. We can ask, Does the Christian worldview explain the facts of nature? Yes, it does, for it says that Jesus created and sustains the universe. Does Christianity provide an explanation for the reliability of human reason itself? Sure; we are created in the image of God with intelligence. Does the Bible explain human nature and experience? Yes, for it relates that, while the image of God and common grace enable us to do good to a certain extent, we are given to sin because of the Fall. In this essay I've tried to provide some foundational principles for defending the faith. As we prepare to give an answer to our society, it's important that we learn to think logically, that we respond to the questions of our day, that we become familiar with the broad range of evidence at our disposal, and that we consider the person or persons we are addressing as we present our case. With this in mind, we exhibit the truth of Jesus Christ in all its splendor, and, as always, leave the results to God.

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Rick Wade graduated from Moody Bible Institute with a B.A. in communications (radio broadcasting) in 1986. He graduated cum laude in 1990 from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School with an M.A. in Christian thought (theology/philosophy of religion) where his studies culminated in a thesis on the apologetics of Carl F.H. Henry. He is currently nearing completion of a Master of Humanities degree at the University of Dallas. Rick's interests focus on apologetics and Christianity and culture with a special interest in issues of special concern in these 'postmodern' days (such as religious pluralism and the matter of truth). Before joining Probe Ministries in February 1997, Rick worked in the ship repair industry in Norfolk, VA. Rick and his family make their home in Garland, Texas.

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