

Apologetics

(Part 1 of 2)

**What is it? What are a couple of the different types?
Is one type better than the other?**

by Johan D. Tangelder

The need to defend Christianity against its accusers is as great today as at any other time in history. We are involved in a war of ideas for people's minds and hearts. But even as Christians complain about the forces we are fighting against – humanism, secularism, postmodernism, cults and new faiths – some earnest Christians wonder whether they should even try to defend their faith. It seems too hard.

Our Western culture, after all, has lost its Christian heritage. How can we make inroads into this culture when almost any thought or action is allowable, and all standards and values, no matter how perverse or bizarre, are all considered equal? Everyone seems to be following their own rules. They say, "There are lots of definitions of truth. Yours is only one of many. It is arrogant to say that Christianity is the only true religion." "It's true for you; it's not true for me" is a common response from students at secular campuses confronted by the claims of any exclusive religion. "Sure, the Muslims believe all sorts of odd things," students say. "At least I think they do. But look, it's their right to do so. It's fine for them. It's not my thing, but why should it be?"

In this climate Christian apologetics stands at a crucial juncture. The challenges are formidable. But in obedience to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), we must accept the challenge. Because we are so obviously a minority today, it is important that we tell our neighbors what we believe and why. It is important we learn how to defend our faith.

In *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* Dr. J. Gresham Machen (1881-1920) put it this way:

"I may be convinced with my whole soul that the Bible is the Word of God; but if my neighbor [insists he has] considerations to show that it is really full of error, I cannot be indifferent to those considerations. ... Two contradictory things cannot both be true. We cannot go on holding to the Bible as the Word of God and at the same time admit the truth of considerations that are contrary to that conviction of ours. I believe with all my soul, in other words, in the necessity of apologetics, the necessity of a reasoned defense of the Christian faith, and in particular a reasoned defense of the Christian conviction that the Bible is the Word of God."

Definition and Purpose of Apologetics

What exactly is apologetics? It doesn't mean apologizing. Apologetics is derived from a Greek root meaning "to defend, to make a reply, to give an answer, to legally defend oneself." It was used in the ancient Greek court, where defendants were given the right to answer or "speak off" the charge brought against them. Plato's *Apology* offers a classic example. There the aged Socrates, accused of corrupting the morals of Athens' youth, stands before the people of his city to answer the charge. He pleads with them: "Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and given heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly."

In Christianity apologetics is a branch of theology which deals with the history of, and ongoing efforts at, establishing an effective defense of the Christian faith against any attack from those outside of that faith. In *Gereformeerde Apologetiek* (Reformed Apologetics) Dr. V. Hepp said that apologetics does not oppose persons but principles that touch upon a man's relationship with God. Therefore, it is a branch of theology.

Apologetics itself is most useful for those who have already started their quest for spiritual reality. It clears away objections to the Christian faith as well as providing reasons for it. An apologist, then, is someone who seeks to defend the Christian faith from attacks from within and without, and who seeks to provide compelling evidence on behalf of the Gospel. In summary, we can say that the task of apologetics is threefold.

First, the Gospel must be clearly defined to eliminate distorted or erroneous descriptions.

Second, apologetics seeks to blunt the attacks of those who would discredit the Gospel, while at the same time showing the inadequacies of non-Christian options.

Third, apologetics marshals evidence that will commend it to the modern mind.

Apologetics in Scripture

Scripture is full of apologetics. The Old Testament prophets often appealed to the facts of history, prophecy, creation, or providence to make their case with other nations. In Acts, Paul reasoned with unbelievers and gave evidence for the Gospel by appealing to creation and the facts surrounding Jesus' life and resurrection. His sermon on the Areopagus in Athens is an example of the apologetics he used to preach the Gospel to the pagans of the Roman empire (Act 17:22-31). Paul also defended himself before the Jewish council (Acts 23:1ff), before Felix (Acts 24:1ff), and before Festus and Agrippa (Acts 26:1ff). He defends his gospel and apostleship in Galatians 1 and 2.

The New Testament does not only repeatedly use "apologia", believers are exhorted by the apostle Peter to engage in apologetics. He wrote, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). In other words, we are to give a rational answer to those who question our faith.

What are we called to defend? We are not called upon to defend everything that goes under the name Christian. Jude 3 gives an answer to this question. We are "to

contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." It is the truth in Scripture, "the faith" that we are to express and defend.

Different Approaches

The serious question in apologetics is the question of strategy. How do we approach the subject? The question of strategy is basic bedrock in Christian apologetics. In *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* Bernard Ramm points out that "unless an apologist is clear at this point he jeopardizes his entire system. Unless he is clear here, he will find it difficult to be clear elsewhere." If our point of departure is wrong, we won't get to our destination.

Today, apologetics is busily practiced. One apologetic work after another hits the market. Christian bookstores usually have a section reserved for such works. But there is great disagreement among the apologists. Someone said that the sheer variety of approaches offered in defending the Christian faith in our postmodern culture is evidence of the vitality of contemporary orthodox Christianity. But life would be much easier for a Christian apologist if all those involved in the defense and propagation of the Gospel would think alike. However, that's not the way it is. There is no agreement about methodology, the relationship of philosophy to apologetics, or even its place in theology.

From among all the various approaches, I will single out two, from the evangelical and reformed schools of thought. The first is often called the "Evidentialist Approach." These people see value in supporting the claims of faith with specific evidences taken from outside the Bible. I will start with these evidentialists, who concentrate on the role of reason in the defense of the faith, and in the next article I will discuss a Reformed approach.

1. The Evidentialist Approach

The evidentialist (or objective) school may be represented with the motto "I understand and I believe." It lines up a barrage of rationalistic arguments to affirm the *credibility* of the Christian faith. It has genuine belief in the ability and trustworthiness of human reason in its search for religious knowledge. Evidentialists insist that objective truth can be established by logic and factual evidences. They argue on the basis of the highly questionable assumption that "everyone agrees what is reasonable." They claim, therefore, that any person graced with common sense and free from prejudice can ascertain that Jesus rose from the dead and can perceive in this the truth of the Christian faith.

This confidence in reason has its roots in the 18th century *Enlightenment*. The primary feature of the Enlightenment was its assertion of the authority of reason. Reason, it was argued, was capable of telling us *everything*, including everything we needed to know about God and morality. The idea of some kind of supernatural revelation was dismissed as irrelevant. Reason reigned supreme. A classic example of rationalist apologetics is John Locke's (1632-1704) *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695). He argued that reason must be given the last word in the acceptance of the supernatural and the interpretation of Scripture. Impressed as he was

with the ability of reason to discover all truth necessary to life, he felt less and less the need for revelation.

Today, one of most popular North American evangelical evidentialists is Lee Strobel. He is the award-winning, best-selling author of *The Case for Christ*, which sold 3 million since its release in 1998, and *The Case for Faith*, which has sold 1.5 million copies since its publication in 2000.

Strobel extended his contract with Christian publisher Zondervan to 2008. Under the seven-figure agreement, he will pen four more books. The contract "calls for more similarly focused books that provides evidence and arguments for Christian faith." Strobel says, "My passion is to help people go through the investigation. It took me two years of investigating to see that evidence from history and science does point to the existence of God."

The former legal editor of *The Chicago Tribune* – and former atheist – set out to debunk Christianity years ago when his wife became a Christian. In his *The Case for Christ* he shows how his investigation resulted in his conversion to the faith that he set out to expose as fraudulent. Strobel says many Christians put too much emphasis on the emotional side of faith. "I run into Christians that have very timid faith because they believe faith is based on emotions. They overlook the intellectual side of it. I want them to discover that. Most people describe conversion as a rush to emotion. I describe it *as a rush of reason*" (italics mine.)

The Failure of Reason

I believe that the evidentialist approach is deeply flawed because it believes that the Gospel revealed in Scripture is immediately available to anyone who can think rationally about these matters. It argues that people can be persuaded of God's existence through proofs.

But imagine for moment that someone does accept the proofs for the existence of God. That does not mean that he has become a Christian ("even the demons believe...and shudder" James 2:19b).

The Christian faith is simply not provable through scientific method. We do not have resources on our own to think about the triune God, or ideas such as truth, justice and peace. To be able to understand these things we must first know Jesus, who is for us the Way, the Truth, and the Life. One must come to the Christian faith believing that it is true and embrace it as such without any dependence on outside evidences. Faith is a free gift of God and not something that can be acquired or bestowed by the power of human reasoning and logic. As J. Gresham Machen pointed out long ago: "Of course a man never was won to Christ *merely* by argument. That is perfectly clear. There must be the mysterious work of the Spirit of God in the new birth. Without that, all our arguments are quite useless." Alarmed by polls indicating that only 28 per cent of Americans have a strong belief in "absolute truth" and that a corresponding relativism is on the rise, Douglas Groothuis urged pastors to begin setting forth a "rational defense of Christianity." Yet within the very same *Christianity Today* (March 9, 1992) column, he acknowledges that such arguments "seldom win a soul to Christ."

Evidentialists don't seem to realize that human reason has its many limitations. For one thing, we often make mistakes. Furthermore, it is limited by the information it

has at hand. For example, how can human reason alone come to the conclusion that God is triune and salvation is by grace and faith alone? My argument, therefore, is that the evidentialist approach as the first line of defense cannot be accepted because it presupposes that man can know God prior to the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, evidentialists don't seem to take into account the effect of sin on the human mind. How can the sin-stained intellect of the unbeliever grasp the things of God? Johannes G. Vos observes in his commentary on *The Westminster Larger Catechism*:

"In the sinful heart there is strong prejudice against God and the truth of God. The ordinary evidences are sufficient to convince a neutral, unprejudiced inquirer that the Bible is the Word of God. But the fact is that there are no neutral, unprejudiced inquirers. The whole human race has fallen into sin; the human heart has been darkened; the 'natural man' is gripped by a tremendous prejudice against accepting the Bible as God's Word. Apart from the special work of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts, there would not be a single true Christian believer in the world."

In other words, we cannot think of human reason apart from the doctrine of human depravity. Evidences are no match for human depravity. If we use them as battering rams against unbelief, they simply bounce back! Reason is always beneath the Word of God for it can never escape its own human limitations nor overcome its own weakened depravity and so give the human mind certainty of the truth of the Gospel.

Since the evidentialist approach is deeply flawed, how then should we defend and propagate the Christian faith? Scripture does warn us against using *bad* philosophy (Col. 2:8) and thinking that evidences alone can illumine the content of the Gospel or lead someone to faith (1 Cor. 1:18-25). But such warnings do not militate against searching for a more Biblical approach to apologetics, so next month we look at a Reformed approach.