

Apologetics

(Part 2 of 2)

Scripture tells us that the Gospel message is “foolishness to those who are perishing.” But if that is true, if unbelievers will find the Gospel foolish, then how do we tell them about it?

by Johan D. Tangelder

Christian apologists have a crucial task – they bring the Gospel into the marketplace of ideas. They endeavor "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15) to persuade non-Christians of the Truth and the beauty of it. They answer honest questions, refute erroneous views, deal with specific criticisms of the Gospel, interact with our postmodern culture, and shatter the myth that the Christian faith is intellectually inferior.

The value of apologetics, therefore, goes beyond evangelism. The broader task of Christian apologists is to create and sustain an environment in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women.

But can apologists expect success? Why do some intelligent and well-educated people deny the Lord, and reject all the evidences for the Christian faith offered to them? The fact that many people do not believe the Gospel despite all the logical and persuasive evidences, or are antagonistic to its claims, may make us uncomfortable, but in itself it does not mean anything. The Scripture never promises any easy acceptance of the claims of the Gospel.

The Incompetence of Reason

But why is apologetics so difficult? Why don't unbelievers, when confronted with Scripture, quickly place their faith in Jesus Christ?

It is because many have already placed their faith elsewhere, and that misplaced faith blinds them to the Truth of Scripture. Many unbelievers today have put their faith in the autonomy of human reason. They trust man's reasoning ability to discern all sorts of truth. Reason is their god.

But should reason, in the form of apologetics, judge the evidence that the Scriptures are the Word of God? Can reason persuade a sinner to come to the Savior? Human reason is not competent to discern the content of the Christian faith – such as creation, the fall into sin, redemption, grace, the working of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, the second coming of our Lord, eternal life, and so forth.

What is often forgotten, also by Christians, is the fact that *reason is not neutral*. Scripture teaches that the mind and thinking processes are tainted by sin, and the mind is used to distort what we know to be true about God (Rom. 1:18-20; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4). Therefore, reason cannot serve as the final arbiter. For example, the great 17th century apologist Blaise Pascal's defense of the Christian was a powerful one, but he well

understood that neither his nor any other approach could make headway with those who were afraid to be open-minded about Christ. "Men despise religion," he said. "They hate it and fear it is true."

The Mystery of the Gospel

Human reason cannot penetrate the content of the Gospel. The Gospel is a mystery. The latter word refers to what cannot be scientifically fathomed. And mystery leads to wonder, which should prevent us from overestimating our thinking powers. The principle characteristic of the Gospel is that it is beyond human imagination or reasoning. No one has ever asked for the cross of Christ; nor was the idea of it ever conceived in the human heart.

Furthermore, however much there is to be said about the history surrounding the resurrection, we cannot fathom it scientifically. A man rose from the dead! That is clearly beyond logic! The resurrection is a great mystery of the Christian faith. The resurrection is all God's work, a demonstration of His grace and love.

Furthermore, how can a creature prove the existence of his Creator, the Lord over time and space? How can the clay have power over the Potter, who fashions and destroys? God's existence doesn't depend on our logic. We may know Him. Yet He remains incomprehensible. Who can understand the mind and ways of God? That's why we talk about the mystery of the Christian faith. Reformed apologetics makes abundant room for mystery – mystery of being, of life, of love, of faith, of sin, of predestination. One cannot examine mystery. Mystery cannot be penetrated by reason. It withdraws from any kind of evidence. With our thinking intellect we have no access to the mystery of the Gospel, we have to accept it by faith. Faith is the basis of knowing.

Faith Seek Understanding

Contrary to secular opinion, it is not just Christians and religious people who believe. Atheists and agnostics do so too. Moreover, belief is fundamental to all human action, not just for "religious people." Believing is at work in the background of everything we do. From the heart, says Scripture (Prov. 4:23), flow the springs of life. Scripture also says, "By *faith* we understand that the world was made by the word of God..." (Heb. 11:3). That is not something one can *understand* - i.e. grasp logically or scientifically in a concept – but one can *believe* it. In *Faith and Hope in Technology* Egbert Schuurman observes, "By faith we know creation as a divinely conceived mystery and it is faith, nurtured by God's Word and Spirit, which offers resistance against overestimation of science."

Faith is accepting authority – it is trust. But many people today balk at the word authority. "How can one accept anything on the basis of the authority of the Christian Bible? We don't believe anything to be true unless we can prove it to be true," they say. But these same people blindly trust the auto mechanic who fixes their cars and the butcher who helps to select the best cut of steak for a special dinner. In short, they accept authority all the time. And they learn by experience whether or not the trust they have placed in those authorities is misplaced. In other words, the choice is between different faiths, not between the Christian faith and none. Christianity is based on the claim that

Jesus Christ is the ultimate meaning of everything. If we believe the Gospel, we have found a firm place to stand. If we are convinced that Jesus is what the New Testament says He is, then the word of Jesus becomes for us law. We cannot then choose whether we will believe Him when He speaks. We *must* believe. His authority then must be for us decisive in all disputes. In *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* James W. Sire notes, "The problem for the early church and us is not that the Gospels give us an untrustworthy picture of Jesus, but they give us a picture that either brings us to our knees or sends us sadly away, knowing we should believe and follow Jesus but unwilling to do so."

2. Presuppositional School

So relying on reason and evidence to "prove" the gospel (the apologetics of the evidentialists - see the previous month's article) is the wrong approach. But if that's the wrong approach, what's the right one?

The church father Augustine (354-430) laid the foundation for the presuppositional school of apologetics. It presupposes the supernatural revelation of God's Word as providing the only basis for the entire apologetic enterprise. Augustine used the phrase *Believe in order to understand*. He could have entitled his apologetic program *Faith Seeking Understanding*. According to Augustine, to attempt to prove Christ to unbelievers is to presume that the unbeliever can see, know, and understand *prior to faith*. But this is impossible. He argued that *first* must come godliness and faith, and then comes understanding!

In this Augustinian tradition are John Calvin (1509-1563), Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987).

In this school of apologetics there are *no neutral* facts.

For example, when people talk about the clash between the Christian faith and science, we must understand that the underlying conflict is *between two different faiths*. Non-Christian scientists do their work as if God does not exist. It is assumed that science is the source of all genuine knowledge. Christian scientists, on the other hand, honor the Creator and explore His handiwork. They do their work assuming (presupposing) that God does exist. The issue, therefore, is not "faith versus science" but rather of what you presuppose.

In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, professor Daniel Dennett hopes that his readers will *embrace* the "dangerous" implications of Darwin's theory of evolution. He uses his book to debunk the Christian faith. He says that Darwinism, rightly understood, is "universal acid" that dissolves all traditional moral and religious beliefs. He even suggests that traditional churches and rituals be relegated to "cultural zoos" for the amusement of onlookers. In other words, he posits his own militant faith in materialistic evolution over against faith in the triune God. Philip Johnson, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, discovered that evidence for evolution was flimsy. It dawned on him that Darwinism is dominant today not because of the strength of scientific evidence but because Darwinism supports an atheistic-materialistic worldview which not only rejects God but also depicts humans as morally autonomous. He realized that the conflict between evolution and creation was not between science and faith, but between two totally different worldviews.

Reformed philosopher and theologian Van Til has been associated for many years with Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, where he was known as an outstanding leader and a "defender of the faith." He argued that the defense of the Christian faith cannot proceed from a neutral or a rationalistic type of apologetic; it must proceed from the presuppositions of the Christian faith itself. Van Til opposed autonomy, the attempt to think and live by some criterion of truth other than God's Word. The only way we can know is through revelation. Van Til's starting point is the fundamental distinction between God's knowledge and human knowledge. He defined apologetics as "the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life." He argued that non-Christian philosophies suffer from internal self-contradictions and posited Christianity as a logically self-consistent worldview. He believed that from the very first step we must walk by faith. In order to be truly rational all human thought must be subject to the authority of Scripture. We must make it clear from the beginning that the Gospel we preach must be believed in order to be understood. Once we presume that His Word is true, we have a basis from which reasoning can truly proceed. We can then reasonably show that the Christian point of view is coherent and that non-Christian alternatives are ultimately incoherent.

Revelation

Throughout the history of the church, Scripture has always been regarded as the inspired and revealed Word of God. Therefore, its trustworthiness has been an assumed rather than a debated aspect of faith. It is only during the last few centuries that modernism began to reverse the dominant and long-standing principle that faith precedes understanding and began to teach that understanding precedes faith.

How do we know the Bible is the authoritative Word of God? Many try to verify the truth of Scripture through fulfillment of prophecy, archeology, science, etc. I have numerous books in my study which seek to meet critics of the Bible on their own ground and demonstrate that the Bible is not full of errors and contradictions. But not reason but the Holy Spirit confirms the truth of Scripture. We can wage a reasoned defense that the Bible is indeed God's Word. However, these evidences are not sufficient to provide a firm faith. This is inconsistent with the Reformed notion of the "self-authenticating" nature of Scripture, as well as the preeminent role of the witness of the Holy Spirit in the acceptance of Scripture.

Scripture itself is our starting point, and not accumulated evidences. Augustine accepted by faith the Bible as the veritable Word of God. He said that God gave us the Bible because "we were too weak by unaided reason to find out the truth and for this cause needed the authority of the Holy Writings." Calvin asserts that, "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit." And he adds that human testimonies which exist to confirm the Bible are not useless. They function as "secondary aids to our feebleness." Calvin concludes that those who seek to prove to unbelievers that "Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known."

Kuyper followed the same argument as Augustine and Calvin. He didn't deny reason the role of conviction of the truth, but reason will always play a secondary role. He said, "The witness of the Holy Spirit is and ever will be the only power which can

carry into our consciousness the certainty concerning Scripture." He was quite emphatic at this point. He argued that a sinner simply cannot test a divine revelation. The function of divine revelation is to heal the sick, to cure our depravity, and to give us knowledge of God. How can the sick cure themselves? To permit the sick and depraved to test their own cure is nonsense. If they could really test their cure, they would not be sick or depraved. Outside intervention is needed.

How must we commend the Gospel to the unbeliever? How can the unspiritual grasp the spiritual? How can the spiritually blind come to see?

A Scriptural starting point is necessary. The apostle Paul spoke of the power of the Word (Rom. 1:16,17). I wonder whether in our day and age we are so impressed by human power that we doubt the power of God's Word? The apostle pointed out that the proclamation of the "foolishness of God" has put all earthly wisdom to shame through the sacrifice of Christ. Augustine pointed out that salvation begins in a situation of utter powerlessness on the part of man. Man does nothing to prepare himself; he does not reach out for help from God. On the contrary, he reaches out for confirmation that he himself is God. Augustine's unshakable conviction was that salvation, just like creation, is an act of God in the strict sense of the word.

The Holy Spirit

We must also acknowledge the essential role of the Holy Spirit in apologetics. We are totally dependent on Him, the third person of the Trinity. He alone can break into people's lives. Apologetics, therefore, is ineffective apart from the work of the Holy Spirit on the heart (1 Cor. 12:3; Titus 3:5-6). It is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin, removes spiritual blindness, and produces new birth (John 3:3-8; 16:8-11; 1 Cor. 2:14-16). However, I want to stress that the Holy Spirit's work *does not make* apologetics unnecessary any more than it renders evangelism optional. The Holy Spirit uses various means in bringing about conviction of the truth. Arguments and evidences can be used by the Spirit to remove intellectual or emotional barriers to the Gospel. As J. Gresham Machen put it, "What the Holy Spirit does in the new birth is not to make a man a Christian regardless of the evidence, but on the contrary to clear away the mists from his eyes and enable him to attend to the evidence."

Conclusion

Why apologetics? Its chief use is enabling Christians to answer the legitimate questions of people who are seeking the truth and are troubled by the hostile voices that are heard on every hand. And there are many restless seekers unacquainted with the Gospel. Like the apostle Paul, we should not be ashamed of the Gospel (Rom.1:16a). To be an effective apologist for the Gospel we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. We need hearts set on fire, inflamed with passion for God, and to live in the world in such a way that the world is driven to ask us about the hope we have (1 Pet. 3:15).