

Introducing Apologetics

Cultivating Christian Commitment

James E. Taylor


Baker Academic
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Acknowledgments	4	14 Lazarus, Come Forth: The Miracles of Jesus	185
Introduction: I Believe, but Help My Unbelief!	5	15 He Is Risen Indeed! The Resurrection of Jesus	199
Part 1 Apologetics and Commitment		16 The Word Became Flesh: The Trinity and the Incarnation	213
1 A Reason for the Hope Within: The Nature of Apologetics	17	17 The Sheep and the Goats: Salvation and Damnation	227
2 Faith and Human Wisdom: Evidentialist Apologetics	29	18 No Other Name: The Problem of Religious Pluralism I	241
3 Jerusalem and Athens: More Objections to Apologetics	39	19 East Meets West: The Problem of Religious Pluralism II	255
4 A God-Shaped Vacuum: The Relevance of Apologetics	51	Part 4 Contemporary Challenges to Christian Commitment	
5 Ears to Hear and Eyes to See: Apologetics and the Heart	63	20 The Spirit of Truth: Commitment, Canon, and Community	269
6 Critics, Seekers, and Doubters: Audiences for Apologetics	75	21 The Spirit of the Age: Critiques from the Social Sciences	283
Part 2 Commitment to God		22 The Origin of Species: Christianity and Natural Selection	299
7 The Global Village: Worldview Options	87	23 The Dust of the Earth: Resurrection, Minds, and Bodies	317
8 The Lord Our God Is One: Monotheism	99	24 The Death of God: Postmodern Challenges to Christianity	331
9 In the Beginning: Cosmological Explanations	113	25 It's All Relative: Cultural Differences and Moral Universalism	347
10 What the Heavens Declare: Teleological Explanations	127	Conclusion: Cultivating Christian Commitment	361
11 Why Do the Righteous Suffer? The Problem of Evil	141	Other Books on Christian Apologetics	363
12 A God Who Hides Himself: The Problem of Evidence	155	Index	364
Part 3 Commitment to God in Christ			
13 Who Do You Say I Am? The Person of Jesus	171		

Introduction

I Believe, but Help My Unbelief!

» **Outline**

- **Christian Belief and Believability**
 - *What Christians Believe*
 - *Concerns about Christian Beliefs*
 - *The Need for Christian Apologetics*
- **My Story of Doubt and Faith**
 - *My College Experience of Doubt and Renewed Faith*
 - *My Story and Christian Apologetics*
 - Experience of God and Reasonable Christian Belief
 - My Denial of Evidentialism
 - My Affirmation of the Value of Apologetics
- **Faith, Reason, and Christian Commitment**
 - *Faith and Reason*
 - Augustinian Fideism
 - Balancing Faith and Reason
 - *Christian Apologetics and Christian Commitment*
 - The Need for Confident Christian Conviction
 - Cultivating Christian Commitment

» **Summary**

Christians believe a number of things that are difficult to believe. Nontheists and non-Christian theists reject all or part of core Christian convictions. Even Christians can have concerns about central Christian claims. In college, I struggled with doubts about whether God exists. My doubts were alleviated by an experi-

ence of God on a mission trip. Now I believe that faith rooted in experience of God's grace is prior to philosophical arguments and historical evidences for Christianity and that objective reasons are not required for faith. However, Christian apologetics is necessary for some people at some times and beneficial for everyone all the time.

» **Basic Terms, Concepts, and Names**

agnostics
Anselm
Apostles' Creed
atheists
Augustine
creeds
evidentialism
fideism
heresy
Lewis, C. S.
mere Christianity
nontheists
orthodoxy
Plantinga, Alvin
rationalism
theists

» **Reflection and Discussion**

» **Further Reading**

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

Christian Belief and Believability

This is a book about Christian apologetics. Christian apologists defend the truth of Christian claims. In doing so, they try to show that it is reasonable to believe what Christians believe. What do Christians believe? They believe that Jesus of Nazareth, a human being who lived in Palestine during the first century AD, not only claimed to be God but also is God. Christians believe that this God-man Jesus preached about God's kingdom, taught people how to be fit to live in it, and showed people what this kingdom would be like by forgiving their sins, miraculously healing their diseases, and delivering them from evil. Christians believe that Jesus chose and equipped twelve disciples to carry on this preaching, teaching, forgiving, healing, and delivering work of the kingdom. Christians believe that Jesus was betrayed

by one of these disciples and then died on a cross—really died. But Christians believe that this dead man Jesus came back to life—real life—and appeared to his disciples for a period of time. They believe that Jesus then ascended to heaven while his disciples watched, created the Christian church by sending them the Holy Spirit, and through this Spirit emboldened and empowered these disciples to preach to the whole world the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross to take on himself the punishment for people's sins so that the sins of those who believe in him would be forgiven. They believe he was then resurrected from the dead to show God's acceptance of his sacrificial death and to make it possible for believers to have eternal life. Christians believe that this God is a Trinity of persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians

also believe that the Bible is God's authoritative Word to human beings that reveals how he plans to save them through Jesus, who is God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. They believe that when Jesus returns to judge the human race, those who do not accept God's offer of salvation through Jesus will suffer eternal damnation, but those who do will be resurrected to eternal life in heaven to be with God and other believers forever.

Do Christians really believe *all* these things? The answer to this question is a qualified yes. Many people who have identified themselves as Christians since the time of Jesus would disagree with at least one of the things just said. Christians have always been aware of these disagreements, and they have always been concerned about them because of the divisions to which they naturally tend to lead. For the sake of unity in the church, therefore, Christians have repeatedly tried to come up with a list of statements that all Christians can agree are true. This is how the great Christian creeds and confessions of faith came about. Examples of these are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The adoption of these creeds did not stop the disagreements, but they did make official a distinction between orthodoxy (right belief) and heresy (wrong belief) in the Christian church. Are *all* the things stated above orthodox Christian beliefs? Probably. Are these the *only* orthodox Christian beliefs? Probably not. The statements above are not one of the creeds accepted by the Christian church, so there may be errors, and there are most likely important omissions. Since a book about Christian apologetics is a book about giving reasons for thinking that the essential or core claims of Christianity are true,

however, it is important to start with at least a rough outline of what these claims are.

Do Christians believe *only* these things? The answer to this question is an unqualified no. Anyone with even a superficial knowledge of the history of the Christian church is well aware of the divisions that have arisen within it in spite of the efforts of Christians to prevent them. The most obvious divisions include the split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church around AD 800 and the one between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants in the 1500s. The splintering of Protestants into various denominations after that time multiplied these divisions significantly. These divisions were the result of various disagreements, many of which were differences of opinion about Christian doctrines. So Christians believe a lot of things in addition to those listed above, but if I were to add all of them to the list, it would be full of contradictions. That is why, for the purposes of this book, I will stick to what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity": those things about which there has been historic consensus, for the most part, in spite of differences about more peripheral matters.¹ In this spirit, Lewis puts the task of Christian apologetics as follows: "We are to defend Christianity itself—the faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied in the Creeds, expounded by the Fathers."² I hope the things listed above

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), vii.

2. C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 90.

fall into this category. You will need to decide for yourself whether they do.

Assuming they do, are these things believable? Try to think about this question from the standpoint of someone who is not a Christian. Such a person may or may not believe in God. People who believe that God exists are called theists, and people who do not believe that God exists are called nontheists. Nontheists who believe that there is no God are called atheists, and nontheists who withhold belief about whether there is a God are called agnostics. Many theists are not Christians. These include many Jews and Muslims, some Hindus, as well as theists in other religious traditions that are not as generally well known. But there are also a number of people who would say they believe there is a God but do not associate themselves with a particular religion.

All these non-Christian theists may have a number of reactions to core Christian beliefs. But it is likely that their disbelief will be directed primarily to the claims made about Jesus, in particular, that he is God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth and who died and was resurrected for our salvation. These are the claims that distinguish Christianity from other theistic religions. Can you see how, for various reasons, it would be difficult for non-Christians to accept these claims about Jesus, even if they already believe in God? For one thing, how could the one God also be three persons? And how could one of these persons be both completely divine and completely human at the same time? Moreover, why would God forgive sins just because Jesus died on a cross? And how could a human being who had been dead for three days come back to

life? Furthermore, even if Jesus could and did come back to life from the grave, how could those who were not there at the time have good reasons for believing that this resurrection occurred? These are only a few of the most central concerns non-Christian theists are likely to have.

Now consider these claims from the point of view of a person who does not even believe that God exists—either an atheist or an agnostic. These people will join the theistic non-Christians in their denial of the main doctrines about Jesus. They will also reject other things about which Christians and many non-Christian theists agree. These include various claims about things God has done or will do, such as that he (1) created the universe, (2) communicated with humans by means of divine revelations of various kinds, (3) performed miracles, and (4) will enable some humans to enjoy an afterlife. Just as non-Christian theists deny Christian claims about Jesus, nontheists deny any affirmation, Christian or otherwise, of supernatural reality or activity.

Non-Christians do not find all the core Christian claims believable. At least they do not believe them all to be true. Since you are reading this book, you are probably among those who believe these Christian claims about God and Jesus. If so, you must find them believable. But have you ever wondered—do you wonder now at times—whether they are *really* believable? Have you ever had—do you sometimes now have—questions or even doubts about the truth of any of these claims? If you have or do, then you are like many other reflective Christians. You are definitely not alone. It is natural to have questions and even doubts about central Christian claims. Think about it. A lot of people

do not accept them. When you reflect on them, especially from their perspective, perhaps you can see why. These claims can be hard to believe. That is why as long as there has been Christianity, there has been such a thing as Christian apologetics (i.e., an effort to make the Christian message and what it implies believable on the basis of human reason).

That is why I have written this book about Christian apologetics. As long as there are people who find Christianity unbelievable—or hard to believe, at least sometimes—there will be a need for books like this. Of course, Christian faith is more than just belief. It also involves trust and obedience. But it is really difficult to trust and obey Jesus if you have a hard time believing that he is God or that there is a God at all. I know this to be true from painful firsthand experience.

My Story of Doubt and Faith

During the summer between my junior and senior years at a Christian liberal arts college, I suddenly began to experience serious and intense doubts about the existence of God. I remember waking up periodically during this time with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Having been a committed Christian most of my life up to that point, this experience of doubt hit me like a ton of bricks. To shift the metaphor, I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me. I wanted very much to believe in God, but during that time I could not. I was a philosophy major, and during my junior year I had taken courses covering the entire history of Western philosophy. One thing that struck me as a result of taking these courses was that if the great

**It is really difficult
to trust and obey Jesus
if you have a hard time
believing that he is God or
that there is a God at all.**

philosophical minds of history could not agree with one another about whether we could *know* that God exists (or even whether God *does* exist), then who was I to think I could figure it out?

At the same time, I was assuming, without realizing it, the philosophical view that what it would take for a belief in God to be reasonable was sufficient evidence in the form of an adequate philosophical argument for God's existence. Given this evidentialist assumption, it is not surprising that I concluded that it was unreasonable for me to believe in God when it seemed that all the arguments for God's existence were inadequate in some respect. Since it never occurred to me at that time to question this evidentialism, I spent much of my senior year trying to find arguments for God's existence that seemed adequate to me. But my philosophical training had enabled me always to find a flaw in any theistic argument I considered. Now, it is true that many nontheists find problems with theistic arguments because they do not really *want* to believe that God exists. But I really *did* want to believe that he exists. I was desperate to find a solid rational foundation for my faith.

My experience of intellectual doubt about something so fundamental to Christian belief as God's existence left me unable to trust and obey him completely and confidently. How could I, when I was

not at all sure that he was real, when a lot of the time I did not even believe that he existed? This quandary made it difficult for me to carry out my duties as director of on-campus ministries. I went through the motions nonetheless. But something happened in the spring semester of my senior year that eventually led to the dissolution of my doubts and the corresponding strengthening of my Christian conviction and commitment. Surprisingly, what happened was not my discovery of philosophical arguments for God's existence so strong as to withstand my critical scrutiny. Instead, it was a spring break trip to Mexico with a few hundred fellow students to lead vacation Bible school programs and evangelistic meetings in various neighborhoods around Ensenada. What I found during that trip was that the experience of Christian service, evangelism, worship, and fellowship revived my faith in God. This revival happened because through these experiences I had a strong sense of God's presence and activity. It is true that when I returned I could not resist entertaining the suspicion that it only *seemed* as though God were there because I was with so many people who believed that he was. At the same time, however, the experiences I had in Mexico had so effectively renewed my Christian conviction and eroded my doubts that I never found this purely sociological explanation convincing.

A few years later while I was in graduate school getting my Ph.D. in philosophy, I encountered a number of philosophical essays written by various Christian philosophers about the relationship between Christian faith and philosophical reason. Reading these helped me to think philosophically about the experiences of

intellectual doubt and experiential faith I had encountered in college. I found the essays written by Alvin Plantinga especially helpful.³ It was from reading his work that I found out about theistic evidentialism—the thesis that belief in God can be rational, reasonable, or justified only if it is based on adequate propositional evidence (philosophical arguments). I found Plantinga's objections to evidentialism convincing (see chap. 2 for an explanation of them). As a result, I came to believe that belief in God can be reasonable apart from adequate theistic arguments—as long as it is grounded in the right kinds of experiences. I also came to believe that the experiences I had undergone in Mexico during my senior year are among the sorts of experiences that can ground reasonable belief in God.

That is my story, and it has shaped the way I think about Christian apologetics. My denial of evidentialism means that I do not think the use of human reason in the form of philosophical arguments or historical evidences is always *necessary* for theistic or Christian belief to be reasonable, rational, or justified. This denial may sound surprising. If I do not think arguments and evidences are required for warranted Christian conviction, then why am I bothering to write a book about Christian apologetics? And how could anything I write about Christian apologetics from this standpoint support apologetic goals? My answer to these important questions is that, though I do not think arguments and evidences are

3. See especially Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 16–93 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

required for reasonable Christian belief for *everyone at all times*, I do believe there are *some people*, whether all the time or just some of the time, for whom it is at least useful and perhaps even necessary to have their faith supplemented by reason. These people may at least sometimes find it helpful or even necessary to consider philosophical arguments and historical evidences either so that their Christian beliefs become sufficiently *reasonable* or so that they come to hold these beliefs with a sufficient degree of confidence. When might a person be in such a position? People may find themselves in a position to benefit from Christian apologetics when they have sincere intellectual questions about core Christian claims that prevent them from confidently endorsing them, even when they are engaging in practices of the sort likely to bring about faith-generating Christian experiences. In other words, Christian apologetics is helpful or needed whenever people either open to Christ or acquainted with Christ begin genuinely to wonder whether central Christian tenets are believable—that is, whether it is reasonable to believe that they are true. I say more about this in chapter 2.

My ongoing experience as a reflective Christian provides an example of the beneficial role apologetics can play on occasion in a believer's life. Though I have not been troubled again by prolonged and debilitating doubt, I have considered many questions over the years that have challenged my faith and led to moments of doubt. I have experienced these moments in spite of my steadily growing and increasingly rich experience of God's gracious love through regular Christian worship, fellowship, and private devotion. As I have

faced these questions and experienced these doubts, I have found it helpful to draw on the wealth of apologetic resources available to Christians today. I have not discovered in these materials any proofs or demonstrations that would compel all rational people to believe that God exists or that Christianity is true. Instead, I have encountered arguments and evidences that have reassured me that it is at least not irrational to be a Christian and, even more, that the Christian worldview is more reasonable than its competitors.

Faith, Reason, and Christian Commitment

My Christian faith is grounded primarily in my experience of God in Christ through the ministry in my life of the Holy Spirit. My faith is a response to God's offer of love, forgiveness, and new life. Since he has initiated a relationship with me by means of making this offer and has enabled me to respond to him by accepting the offer, there is an important sense in which my faith is a gift from God. At the same time, as I reflect on all that is implied by the gospel of Christ, I have questions about the extent to which it is reasonable to believe these things. This questioning is intensified by the startling nature of the claims themselves (look again at the first paragraph of this introduction) and the fact that so many people—even people who believe in God—reject these claims as false (or at least not sufficiently evident to be believable). So I reflect on these questions, and when I do, I make use of another of God's wonderful gifts to me: my mind. I find that when I use my mind to reason about the answers to these

questions, my faith can be strengthened as a result.

The great Christian philosopher and theologian Augustine (354–430) took the following approach to the relationship between faith and reason. He said, “I believe in order to understand.”⁴ Another important Christian thinker who followed in his footsteps, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), expressed the same idea in terms of “faith seeking understanding.”⁵ Their view of faith and reason is called fideism (from the Latin word for faith, *fide*) as opposed to rationalism, since it gives faith priority over reason. Since I agree with Augustine and Anselm on this issue, I classify myself as a sort of fideist. But since many think of fideists as people who say that reason should play no role at all in Christian belief, it is important to point out here that I am not an adherent of nonrational (or even irrational) fideism but of what can be called responsible fideism.⁶

As a responsible fideist, I will attempt in this book to steer a middle course between an overemphasis on reason and an overemphasis on faith. Too much confidence in reason may lead to doubt or unbelief because no combination of arguments and evidences can prove conclusively that God exists or that Christianity is true. If a Christian apologist should nevertheless claim to have demonstrated that either of these claims is true, as many have claimed to do, his or her readers or audience may well develop a false sense of security in human reason, which can lead to disillusionment later when reason’s limitations become apparent.

This danger is especially severe when such overconfident claims are accompanied by the evidentialist assumption that such proofs are required for reasonable Christian belief. At the same time, however, too much emphasis on faith to the exclusion of reason may also lead to doubt or unbelief because there are legitimate questions of an intellectual sort about Christianity, such as the problem of evil or the problem of religious pluralism, that trouble sincere believers and seekers. If people who are challenged by such questions are told to “just have faith,” then they may persist in needless doubt and perhaps even reject their faith, when there are excellent intellectual resources available that address these concerns. So it is for the sake of cultivating confident Christian conviction and commitment that I will attempt to find a good balance between faith and reason.

There are many practical reasons for seeking to strengthen the degree of confidence with which Christians maintain their beliefs (without, of course, sacrificing their intellectual integrity in the process). During the worship service at our church last Sunday morning, I was struck by the extent to which heartfelt devotion to Jesus Christ of the sort expressed by my fellow congregants in song and prayer is possible only for those who are deeply convinced that Jesus is really the risen Lord of the universe. Moreover, as I pray for the missionaries sent out by my denomination, I am aware of how much they are in need of a steady conviction that the gospel is true as they seek to share it in various places around the world—often in the face of opposition and discouragement. Indeed, confident conviction is needed by every

4. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.1.1.

5. Anselm, *Proslogium*, preface.

6. See C. Stephen Evans, *Faith beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 52.

Christian, every day and in every place, who strives to live a life governed by the reality of Jesus' resurrection in the midst of a society that is, to a large extent, secular, materialistic, immoral, relativistic, and even nihilistic. The challenge is that it is often difficult to believe Christian claims with full confidence (as Paul says to the Corinthians, his preaching of Christ crucified is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" [1 Cor. 1:23]), and yet it is also important to believe confidently. The sincerity of Christian worship and prayer and the effectiveness of Christian service and evangelism depend on it.

It is for this reason that I conceive of Christian apologetics as *ultimately* a contribution to the cultivation of Christian commitment, though it is *primarily* an effort to defend the reasonableness of believing that Christian claims are true. Whether the efforts of the apologist are directed mostly to seekers who are considering a commitment to Christ or largely to Christians who are struggling with intellectual challenges to their faith, the goal ought to be to cultivate Christian commitment (belief, trust, and obedience). The word *cultivate* is important for my purposes in this book. Following Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils (Matt. 13:3–23), I like to think of the gospel as a seed that falls on the soil of people's lives. Whether the seed grows into a flourishing plant or not depends on many factors. In the end, some of these factors are under human control, and others are up to God. Every gardener knows that there is only so much one can do to make a plant grow. One can put it in good soil in a place likely to receive adequate sunlight, give it ample water and fertilizer, and keep the weeds and insects at bay. After doing all this,

however, one needs to let these things do the work they were designed by God to do. Gardening is an art, but it is a *cooperative* art—an art involving the cooperation of the gardener with nature. In the same way, apologetics and evangelism are cooperative arts. The evangelist preaches the gospel, and the apologist defends it, but it is God who enables it to take root in a human soul and to yield the fruit of confident Christian commitment.

The first part of this book discusses apologetics—a component of the means to the end of Christian commitment—and Christian commitment itself, the end to which apologetics contributes. In discussing apologetics, part 1 says more about what it is, what it is for, and what it cannot do (chap. 1); why, though useful, it is not always needed (chap. 2); why it is possible and not harmful (chap. 3); and why it is relevant to human needs and concerns (chap. 4). Chapter 5 discusses the role of the heart in Christian commitment, and chapter 6 focuses on how different conditions of the heart can affect the way in which people ask questions about Christianity. Chapter 1 also provides an overview of the strategies used in the rest of the book as it considers questions about

**The evangelist
preaches the gospel, and the
apologist defends it,
but it is God who enables
it to take root in a human
soul and to yield the fruit
of confident Christian
commitment.**

Christianity one by one. In general, these strategies involve both watering and weeding. In other words, they focus on both (1) providing arguments and evidences *for* Christian truth claims (watering) to help the seed of the gospel grow in the human soul into full commitment and (2) constructing a rational case *against* objections to the Christian faith (weeding) to prevent these criticisms from undermining full commitment. The last three parts

of the book encourage this sort of watering and weeding with respect to commitment to God (part 2), commitment to God in Christ (part 3), and contemporary challenges to Christian commitment (part 4). This last part provides opportunities for apologetic weeding relative to two general areas of contemporary concern: challenges to Christian commitment based on science and challenges to Christian commitment based on postmodernism.

Reflection and Discussion

1. What Christian claims do you have the hardest time believing? Why do you think this is?
2. Has your Christian faith ever been threatened by serious and painful doubts? If so, what did you do about it? If not, how would you help someone who struggles with doubt?
3. What do you think is the proper relationship between faith and reason? Are you a fideist or a rationalist? Why?

Further Reading

- Clark, Kelly James. *When Faith Is Not Enough*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. Temecula, CA: Textbook Publishers, 2003.
- Swinburne, Richard. *Faith and Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

A Reason for the Hope Within

The Nature of Apologetics

» **Outline**

- **The Nature of Christian Apologetics**
 - *Two Consequences of Faith-based Apologetics*
 - The Rejection of Neutrality
 - The Consistency of Faith and Rationality
 - *Specific Apologetical Tasks*
 - Four Forms of Rational and Critical Thinking about Christianity
 - Four Metaphors for Positive and Negative Apologetics
- **The Purpose of Christian Apologetics**
 - *The Cultivation of Christian Commitment*
 - *Issues Addressed by Christian Apologists*
 - *Noncomparative and Comparative Rationality*
 - *Modest Apologetics versus Ambitious Apologetics*
- **The Limits of Christian Apologetics**
 - *The Practical Limits of Christian Apologetics*
 - A Heart of Humility
 - An Irenic Approach
 - *The Theoretical Limits of Christian Apologetics*
 - The Limits of Arguments and Evidences
 - How Apologetical Theory and Practice Work Together

» **Summary**

Christian apologetics is a defense of the reasonableness of believing that the Christian worldview is universally and objectively true.

Apologetics draw on objective reasons, arguments, and evidences for this purpose. Apologetics employ these rational resources both to help faith grow by offering a positive case for Christian claims (watering) and to prevent faith from dying by arguing against objections to Christian claims (weeding). The goal is to try to show that Christianity is at least as reasonable as its most reasonable competitor or, if possible, that it is more reasonable than any worldview with which it competes. But there are both theoretical and practical limits to apologetics. Apologetics need to be humble, irenic, and aware that all their arguments are rationally resistible.

» **Basic Terms, Concepts, and Names**

ambitious apologetics
 apologetics
 apology
 circular arguments
 comparative rationality
 modest apologetics
 negative apologetics
 noncomparative rationality
 polemics
 positive apologetics
 rational resistibility
 worldviews

» **Reflection and Discussion**

» **Further Reading**

Do not fear . . . and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

1 Peter 3:14–15, author’s translation

Nowadays, an apology is an expression of regret for a wrong done. When you apologize to someone for something you did to that person, you are (ideally) not trying to prove something or to defend your actions but instead to admit that you were wrong about something you both can agree you did. In contrast, an apology in ancient Greece (Greek: *apologia*) was a legal defense against an official charge. If you have taken a philosophy class, you may be familiar with Plato’s *Apology*, in which he describes Socrates’ defense at his trial in response to the charges brought against him by some of his fellow citizens. In this dialogue, Plato records the arguments Socrates employed for the purpose of convincing the jury not to convict him of these charges. Socrates gives reasons in support of the claim that he is innocent so that his fellow Athenians might see the accusations leveled at him as unreasonable. In ancient Greece, therefore, an apology involved formulating arguments and giving reasons in one’s defense.

In the New Testament, the author of the Epistle of 1 Peter exhorts his persecuted Christian readers to be prepared to provide an *apologia* for their Christian hope when their opponents challenge them (3:15). In light of the legal context in which this Greek word was typically used, it seems clear that the recipients of this epistle were being urged to defend themselves against criticism by giving reasons for the truth of the beliefs on which their hope was based. When we look at 1 Peter as a whole, it becomes apparent that the aim of this letter was to encourage Christians in Asia Minor to cultivate faith, hope, and love so that they might obtain the salvation of their souls (1:9) and cause nonbelievers to glorify God by their good example (2:12). This is the context in which we must understand the passage quoted above, a passage often cited as a scriptural mandate for Christian apologetics—the defense of the Christian faith. If this mandate applies to Christians today, and I believe it does, then all followers of Jesus are called to be apologists. This passage teaches three

things about the nature, purpose, and limits of Christian apologetics.

The Nature of Christian Apologetics

The first thing the 1 Peter passage teaches is that Christian apologetics is a reasoned defense of Christian belief that starts with a *foundation of faith* in Jesus Christ as Lord (“set apart Christ as Lord”). Christian apologetics is not a neutral study of religion in general or of Christianity in particular (like religious studies or philosophy of religion) but a defense of the truth of Christian convictions from the standpoint of Christian commitment. At least two important consequences follow from this starting point.

First, apologists are not people who suspend all their fundamental beliefs and values in order to investigate how reasonable it is to have them. Such a completely neutral stance is neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible, since we do not have direct voluntary control over our fundamental beliefs and values. We cannot simply decide to get rid of our convictions and ideals at the drop of a hat. Moreover, a change in people’s fundamental beliefs and values always results in the adoption of alternative beliefs and values. Complete neutrality about fundamental beliefs and values just is not possible. Furthermore, a complete suspension of fundamental beliefs and values would not be desirable even if it were possible. For one thing, healthy living requires some basic convictions and commitments. Moreover, even if people have not examined their beliefs and values carefully, it is usually more reasonable for them to continue affirming them than to withhold them. Therefore,

**Christian apologetics
is a reasoned defense of
Christian belief that starts
with a *foundation of faith*
in Jesus Christ as Lord.**

a complete suspension of conviction and commitment would be unreasonable. It is often reasonable to maintain the same perspectives and principles even in the face of apparently good arguments against them, because further investigation may well show that these opposing arguments are not so good after all. This sort of thing happens in the sciences frequently when scientists initially encounter evidence that seems to falsify their theories. If these theories have explanatory value and have survived prior tests, it is reasonable to keep them until the evidence against them is overwhelming. If this practice is reasonable for scientists, then it is also rational for Christians and Christian apologists.

Second, Christian faith is consistent with rational and critical thinking about Christian claims. This is further support for the position about the relationship between faith and reason given in the introduction. Both faith and reason are valuable Christian resources. Christians are called to engage in rational and critical thinking about their faith, as long as this thinking is *Christian*. Christian thinking involves reflecting on life and the world from a Christian perspective—that is, from the standpoint of Christian beliefs of the sort listed in the introduction. There is a sense in which Christian theology is thinking about everything—God, the world, and human life—from the standpoint of

the basic Christian convictions that are derivable from the Bible. The end result of such contemplation is not only a Christian theology but also a Christian *worldview*, a big, unified way of seeing everything from a Christian perspective. There are, of course, non-Christian worldviews as well, and we will look at some of these in chapters 7, 8, 18, and 19. Chapter 24 also considers the postmodern idea that the idea of a worldview as traditionally conceived is wrongheaded. But for now we will concentrate primarily on the rational and critical evaluation of the Christian worldview.

To say that Christian apologetics involves rational and critical thinking about the Christian worldview from the standpoint of Christian commitment is *not* to say that the arguments and evidences employed by a Christian apologist will presuppose the truth of Christian claims. If they did, they would be circular arguments, and circular arguments cannot provide rational support for their conclusions. Instead, a Christian apologist is a committed Christian who is motivated by this commitment to engage in rational and critical thinking about the Christian worldview in order to show that it is reasonable to adopt it. On the other hand, once an argument has been offered for a claim, it is legitimate to use this claim as a premise in an argument for another conclusion. For instance, once an apologist has given adequate reasons for believing that God exists, it is appropriate to assume God's existence in an argument for the possibility of miracles. If it were not for this possibility of employing the conclusions of some arguments as premises in other arguments, it would not be possible to construct the kind of cumulative case

for the Christian worldview illustrated in this book.¹ Such a cumulative case for Christianity is based on the accumulation of a range of philosophical arguments, historical evidences, scientific observations, and personal experiences.

This kind of defense employs the following four forms of rational and critical thinking about the Christian worldview:

1. giving reasons for thinking that the core claims of the Christian worldview are true
2. arguing that objections against the Christian worldview do not succeed in showing that it is unreasonable or false
3. giving reasons for thinking that the claims of worldviews that are logically inconsistent with the Christian worldview (such as naturalism and many but not all the claims of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) are unreasonable or false
4. arguing that the arguments given for the claims of alternative worldviews that are inconsistent with Christianity do not succeed in showing that those alternative worldviews are true

Historically, the word *apologetics* has often applied narrowly only to tasks 1 and 2. Tasks 3 and 4 have traditionally been labeled "polemics," since they not only have to do with defending the rationality of the Christian worldview but also involve

1. Contemporary philosophers who have attempted to construct a cumulative case for a theistic worldview include Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

arguing against other worldviews. This book uses the word *apologetics* broadly to include tasks 1 through 4 (both apologetics and polemics in the narrow sense of these terms).

Apologetic tasks 1 through 4 can be classified in terms of the two apologetic strategies mentioned at the end of the introduction: watering and weeding. Task 1 is a watering task, and tasks 2 through 4 are weeding tasks. Recall that apologetic watering involves preparing for the cultivation of Christian commitment by giving reasons that contribute to the case for the rationality of belief in the Christian worldview. Other metaphors may be helpful in expressing the main idea here. With a theater metaphor, we could talk about setting the stage. A play cannot occur until the appropriate scenery and props are provided. A metaphor from competitive sports would characterize this apologetic task in terms of a positive, offensive strategy that would make it more likely that your team would score a goal. In regard to construction, we could think in terms of laying the groundwork for a building. What all these metaphors are intended to convey is the idea of giving reasons for thinking that Christianity is true. Apologetic weeding involves removing reasons for thinking that Christianity is false. We can express the same idea by talking about clearing the stage or removing obstacles (theater), a defensive strategy aimed at preventing the other team from scoring points (sports), and retrofitting a building to protect it from earthquakes (construction).

I have chosen the gardening metaphor because, as explained above, it reminds us that there is a role for both humans and God in the cultivation of Christian commitment. All these metaphors can

be misleading, because they may seem to imply that apologetic arguments and evidences are always necessary for reasonable faith, a view I rejected above and will argue against in the next chapter. To avoid misunderstanding along these lines, we should remember that, though watering is always required for a garden to grow, this water can be and often is supplied by rain, something over which humans have no control. It is only in special conditions—drought, for instance—that humans need to intervene with additional water.

The Purpose of Christian Apologetics

The second lesson we can learn from 1 Peter 3:14–15 is that the aim of Christian apologetics is to cultivate Christian commitment among both believers and unbelievers by means of a relevant *reservoir of reasons* (“always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you a reason for the hope that is in you”). These are reasons in support of Christian faith that can be given at different times (“always”) and to different people (“to anyone”). The history of Christian apologetics is a history of defenses of the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ that address the concerns of the apologists’ times in the language of those times.²

Some of the concerns addressed by Christian apologists are perennial—they are the same from one generation to the next. The questions raised in the introduction about Jesus’ divinity and resurrec-

2. See C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 96–99, for some wise words about the use of language in apologetics.

tion from the dead are among these (see chaps. 13–16). Another is the problem of evil, the problem of trying to understand why God allows the kinds and quantities of sin, pain, and suffering that exist in the world (see chaps. 11–12). However, there are other issues that are not on the apologist's front burner as they used to be. An example is polytheism, the belief in and worship of many gods. Though this was a topic of Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus (see Acts 17:16–34), it is no longer a major competitor with the Christian faith, at least in our society and culture.³ Idolatry, however, is a concern closely related to polytheism that survives in altered form to this day. Though we are not tempted in our culture to bow down physically to idols like statuettes, the attitudes and behaviors we manifest toward rock musicians, movie stars, and famous athletes are similar to the thoughts and actions of worshipers. We also tend to treat money as an idol. Jesus' warning that it is not possible to serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24) is just one of many New Testament admonitions against this form of idolatry. Our culture's materialism and consumerism are signs that the almighty dollar has not stopped competing with God.

The focus of this book, however, is on more intellectual threats to the Christian worldview, theoretical alternatives that vie for belief rather than practical alternatives that compete for behavior. Among the more intellectual challenges to contemporary Christian belief (that have not always faced Christians so urgently as they do today) are skepticism about the existence of God (chaps. 11–12), the problem of religious pluralism (chaps.

18–19), the higher critical approach to the Bible (chaps. 13–15, 21), various scientific challenges (such as Darwinian evolutionary theory; chaps. 10, 22), and postmodern relativism and nihilism (chaps. 24–25).

The purpose of apologetics, therefore, is to provide a rational defense of Christianity that addresses concerns like these in language hearers can understand. But what would count as a successful apology, an apology that has fulfilled its purpose? And how can an apologist know when his or her apology has succeeded? There are at least two general questions about apologetics that bear on the question of success. First, how reasonable is it to accept Christian doctrines from the standpoint of an absolute standard of rationality? Second, how reasonable is it to believe the claims of Christianity rather than those of other competing major worldviews (such as naturalism, versions of pantheism, and other forms of theism [see chaps. 7–8])? Both of these questions are important, since it is theoretically possible that Christianity is more reasonable than any competing worldview and yet not very reasonable in itself (this would be the case if Christianity were the least implausible among a group of relatively implausible worldviews).

There are three possible general answers to the first question. Christianity could be:

1. unreasonable (there is more reason to reject it than to accept it)
2. maximally reasonable (capable of being shown conclusively or decisively to be true)
3. reasonable to some non-maximal degree

3. Nonetheless, chap. 8 discusses polytheism.

Outcome 1 is clearly inadequate from the standpoint of traditional apologetics. Traditional apologists agree that Christian faith, though it may in some respects be *above* reason, is not *against* reason. Though outcome 2 would seem to be ideal, the history of Christian apologetics shows that it is simply not possible. In addition, if there were a *conclusive* rational proof of the truth of the Christian faith, it would not be clear why submission to Christ requires a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, as we will see in chapter 5, there are good reasons for thinking that God set things up in such a way as to preclude the possibility of such conclusive rational proofs of Christianity. So the desired outcome of Christian apologetics, from the standpoint of a noncomparative standard of rationality (a standard that shows how rational Christianity is on its own rather than in comparison with competing worldviews), is to show that Christian belief is rational to some less than maximal degree (option 3). But again, even if this could be shown, there is still the question concerning how Christian faith fares rationally relative to the alternative worldviews with which it competes.

There are four possible general answers to the second question. Christianity could be:

1. less reasonable than the most reasonable worldview with which it competes
2. at least as reasonable as (but not more reasonable than) the most reasonable worldview with which it competes
3. more reasonable than all the worldviews with which it competes
4. the only genuinely reasonable alternative

Perhaps outcome 4 would seem to be the best. However, it is implausible. Most if not all major alternatives to Christianity are reasonable *to some extent*. Moreover, all Christian claims are “rationally resistible.”⁴ That is, it is always possible to give a reason (though perhaps not a very good one) to resist accepting a Christian claim, even if a good argument has been offered on behalf of it (we will see how this works in chap. 9). One need only have a reason to reject a premise of the argument.

If 4 is not an acceptable goal, then from the standpoint of the nature and purpose of traditional apologetics, outcome 3 is clearly the most desirable one, and outcome 1 is clearly the least desirable. Traditional Christian apologetics would fail to accomplish its goal of defending the reasonableness of Christian belief if it should turn out that Christianity is less reasonable than the most reasonable worldview with which it competes, because it would be unreasonable to believe it rather than to endorse a more reasonable alternative. What about outcome 2? If an apology for the Christian faith could make a good case for the claim that Christianity is just as reasonable as its most reasonable competitor, then it would have accomplished a worthy goal. We could say that by meeting this goal, an apology has shown that Christianity is cosmically competitive.⁵ However, it would clearly be better to

4. See Michael J. Murray, “Reason for Hope (in a Postmodern World),” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10–14, for a helpful discussion of the rational resistibility of arguments for and against theism.

5. My colleague Bob Wennberg came up with this label.

show that Christianity is more reasonable than its most reasonable competitor. This latter result would be to show the cosmic superiority of Christianity. Let us call an apologetic strategy that shows Christianity to be only cosmically competitive a strategy of modest apologetics, and an apologetic strategy that shows Christianity to be cosmically superior to all its competitors a strategy of ambitious apologetics. It would seem that the best tack to take as a Christian apologist is to pursue the outcome of ambitious apologetics and to settle for the outcome of modest apologetics if it turns out to be the best one can do.

Some would say that a successful ambitious apologetic strategy must *prove* or *demonstrate* that Christianity is true or at least that God exists. This conception of apologetics, however, borders on defining apologetic success in terms of outcome 4 above (according to which the Christian worldview is the only reasonable alternative). Let me reiterate here that I do not believe such a conclusive case for Christianity is either possible or even desirable. This would be a case of “overwatering.” This much water is not available, it would be detrimental to the “plants,” and it is not really necessary for their growth. Faith based on the experience of God’s gracious love is, as I claimed above and will argue below (in chap. 2), all a garden really needs, except in certain special circumstances. So the watering task will not involve demonstrative and conclusive proofs but instead plausible arguments and rational evidences. But though the watering will not involve *showing* that Christianity is true, the weeding will have the goal of making it reasonable to think that Christianity has not

been shown false. The goal of weeding, then, is to give good reasons for thinking that it *is not irrational* to hold Christian beliefs. The goal of watering is to show that it *is rational* to adopt the Christian worldview.

The Limits of Christian Apologetics

The third and final conclusion we can draw about Christian apologetics from 1 Peter 3:14–15 is that this activity requires having a *heart of humility* toward those who criticize, object to, and doubt Christianity (“yet do it [make your defense] with gentleness and reverence”). Though it is well and good for Christian apologists to be confident, arrogance is out. Unfortunately, defenders of Christianity throughout history have not always restricted themselves to a humble approach. Manifestations of such humility include the following. Apologists should (1) listen to and try to understand those with concerns about Christianity, (2) seek common ground with those with whom they disagree, (3) be open to the possibility that the reasons they give for their faith are in need of improvement, and (4) put alternative positions against which they argue in the best possible light.

Another way to put this point is that Christian apologetics ought to be *irenic* (conducive to peace and harmony). Though the purpose of Christian apologetics is to defend the Christian faith, it does not have to be *defensive*. Many apologetic works throughout history have been written in such a way as to alienate the very audience to which they were directed. These books were written in highly adversarial ways that tended to polarize Christianity

and its competitors needlessly. There are various ways in which this has been done. One way is by using language that characterizes the adherents of alternative faiths or points of view as either intellectually or morally deficient without an admission of similar deficiencies on the part of Christians. Instead, this book is written in the spirit of the familiar idea that Christians who share or defend their faith should be like beggars helping other beggars find bread.⁶

Another way to put people off unnecessarily is to say or imply that no worldview other than the Christian worldview has any truth or value in it whatsoever. Clearly, if Christianity is true, then any claim made by an alternative worldview that is logically incompatible with the central claims of the Christian faith must be false. But this leaves open the possibility of common ground between Christianity and other traditions. An irenic approach looks for and affirms whatever Christianity shares with competing points of view. It is also open to the possibility that Christians can learn something important from alternative visions of reality.

A third source of antagonism in some apologetic efforts stems from an overconfidence in the efficacy of human reason in demonstrating the truths of the Christian faith and a corresponding failure to appreciate the relative ambiguity and inconclusiveness of much evidence for Christianity and the relative uncertainty that this engenders. There is a skeptical

An irenic approach looks for and affirms whatever Christianity shares with competing points of view.

streak in these postmodern times that leads many people to reject overly optimistic and rationalistic approaches as intellectually naive or dishonest. Though I believe much postmodern skepticism is overblown (see chap. 24), I do think there is good reason not to expect too much out of human reason. This book affirms the relative inconclusiveness and lack of absolute objective certainty of the rational case for Christianity without diminishing the relatively high degree of rationality it is possible to achieve through a combination of arguments, evidences, and the corresponding relatively high degree of Christian commitment that this makes possible.

This book is irenic, therefore, in that it does not vilify opponents, seeks common ground, and admits some uncertainty. This is in line with the admonition in 1 Peter always to be ready to defend one's faith "with gentleness." After all, though the gospel can be offensive in some respects (because, for one thing, it assumes that all human beings are sinners), those who preach and defend the gospel ought not to be offensive.

In addition to these practical, moral limits, Christian apologetics also faces theoretical limits. As already pointed out, the history of Christian apologetics shows that no case for the Christian faith is conclusive or decisive in such a way as to show that all competing alternatives are clearly false. Moreover, adherents of

6. According to James B. Simpson, comp., *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), the Sri Lankan theologian D. T. Niles was quoted by the *New York Times* on May 11, 1986, as saying that "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread."

some alternatives often have good reasons for their views and often have plausible reasons, given their other beliefs and experiences, to reject Christian views—at least temporarily. These theoretical limits provide a good reason for the practical, moral limits already discussed. Humility requires acknowledging these historically demonstrated facts about the theoretical limits of Christian apologetics. The task of the Christian apologist, then, is not to prove conclusively that Christianity is true and that all competitors are false (or even that only Christianity is rational) but rather to provide reasons for thinking that it is more reasonable to believe Christianity than to accept any alternative worldview.

Another important point about the theoretical limits of Christian apologetics is that it is not possible for rational argumentation alone to make a person into (or sustain a person as) a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). He also told some Jewish critics, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). One very important reason for this is that the cultivation of Christian commitment is not merely an intellectual matter but also, and perhaps mostly, a matter of the heart and the will. Sinful human beings are incapable of a conversion of their wills to Christ apart from the supernatural grace of God. This does not mean that an appeal to the mind by means of rational argumentation and broader kinds of evidences is of no value in bringing someone to Christ (and keeping him or her committed to Christ). Though the work of the Holy Spirit is required for submission to the lordship of Christ, the

Spirit can make use of human reasoning in the process of bringing a person to faith (and restoring faith in the case of Christians who have doubts).

Apologetists are best seen as partners of the Holy Spirit in the process of cultivating Christian commitment. Here the metaphor of cultivating a garden is especially helpful. As said above, just as plants cannot grow solely as a result of the efforts of a gardener but also need various natural contributions beyond his or her control, so an apologist and/or evangelist cannot make a person a follower of Jesus apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. A gardener supplies water, soil, and a place in the sun, but the plant will not grow apart from the natural powers intrinsic to these things, which the gardener does not create. In the same way, an evangelist can preach the gospel eloquently, and an apologist can defend it rationally, but only the Holy Spirit can enable the listeners to respond with faith to what they hear.

There is another interesting connection between these practical and theoretical limits that is worth mentioning here. To the extent that rational arguments and evidences of a philosophical or historical sort do not suffice by themselves to establish the truth of Christian belief, other kinds of considerations become important. Among these alternative considerations are those that have to do with the practical consequences of Christian commitment.

One of the things that Christians claim to be true is that people who live lives of faith in Jesus Christ can be radically transformed for the better. Paul states that the fruit of the Spirit—that is, the attitudinal and behavioral result of the work of the Holy Spirit in one’s life—is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness

and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). The Greek word for gentleness here (*prautes*), which can also be translated “humility,” is a form of the same word used in 1 Peter 3:16 (“yet do it with gentleness [*prautetos*]”). If we put these passages together, we can see that Christians who manifest the fruit of the Spirit can be Christian apologists who are always ready to defend the hope within them in the way they are admonished to do so in 1 Peter. Christian apologists, therefore, can supplement their theoretical arguments with practical evidence. If Christianity is true, then there really is a Holy Spirit who can make people humble and gentle. Consequently, humble apolo-

gists can contribute to the confirmation of the Christian worldview by how they live in general and how they defend their faith in particular. But they can also contribute to the disconfirmation of Christianity if their lives and apologetic methods are characterized by arrogance and manipulation. Accordingly, the existence of the theoretical limits to apologetics makes it very important for apologists to remember the practical limits.⁷

7. See John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Humble Apologetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially 227–32, for more along these lines.

Reflection and Discussion

1. Is your foundation of faith in Jesus strong enough at this point in your life for you to engage in a defense of your faith? If not, what do you need to do to strengthen it?
2. Are you more in favor of “modest” apologetics or “ambitious” apologetics? Why?
3. Do you know people who have not shown enough humility in their defense of the Christian faith? What have been the consequences of their arrogance?

Further Reading

- Mitchell, Basil. *The Justification of Religious Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Murray, Michael J. “Reason for Hope (in the Postmodern World).” In *Reason for the Hope Within*, edited by Michael J. Murray, 1–19. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Stackhouse, John G., Jr. *Humble Apologetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.