



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 38 (September 2008)

Apologetics and the Gospel

1 Peter 3:15

ABOUT 36 YEARS AGO, IN MY FIRST SEMESTER OF theology, my professor required a 3,000 word research paper on any subject that had been covered during that semester. (Actually, I think my passion for writing was ignited partially by that event.) The topic I chose was one that had been bothering me ever since we had dealt with it in class, namely, the logical proofs for the existence of God. These classic arguments were originally designed to prove God's existence rationally.

But even as a naïve, know-nothing neophyte, this idea bothered me. "Is this the way we should approach God?" I asked in my paper. "Is this how we should 'argue' to a lost world?" It is now, three and a half decades later, that I am still troubled by this in a very popular form of evangelism called *apologetics*.

What Is Apologetics?

When we do something that offends or hurts someone, we "apologize" or "make an apology," which is an admission of error. The source of those English words, however, has a very different meaning.

Here we quote our text: **But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.** The word **answer** translates the Greek *apologia*, which is comprised of *apo*, "from," and *logos*, "speech." In Classical Greek, it was used as a legal term referring to an attorney presenting a defense for his client.

That idea is carried over into the New Testament. Paul, for example, made a "defense" before the people of Jeru-

salem for his speaking against the Law in Acts 22:1. He also "answered" Festus in defense of his faith (25:8; cf. v. 15), as well as Agrippa (26:1).

The question that arises, however, is what does such a "defense" or "answer" mean? Does it mean that in order to be an effective witness for Christ we each must memorize reams of facts about creation science so that we can shoot down every argument the evolutionist raises? Does it mean that we can't possibly be effective in evangelism if we can't prove the accuracy of the Bible to the atheist by reciting all the archeological evidences for the existence of ancient cities mentioned in the Bible?

A few months ago, I heard a noted speaker say, "There is no [Church office] of Apologist," but he went on to insist nonetheless that this kind of "elder" is crucial for the church today. His ministry consists, then, of debates and open forums with every ilk of unbeliever, outspoken (even violent) enemy of Christianity, and the most vile and immoral people of society. As stated back in our July issue, what is this if it is not "[casting] . . . pearls before swine," thereby not only *allowing* but even further *empowering* such people to "trample [God's truth] under their feet" (Matt. 7:6)?

The Major Approaches to Apologetics

Apologetics is defined, as one noted author writes, as "the reasoned defense of the Christian religion. Christianity is a faith, to be sure; but there are reasons for this faith. Faith is not to be confused with reason; but neither is it to be separated from it."¹ There are three major approaches to apologetics that have been advocated through the years.

Classical Apologetics

This approach defends the faith through rational arguments for the existence of God, using evidence to substantiate biblical claims and miracles. Early classical apologists include Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas (which actually should bother us because they all, especially Aquinas, tried to blend Scripture with pagan Greek philosophy). Such an apologetic might go something like this:

Steve: Can you give me any logical evidence that God exists?

Jim: Well, I can sure try. After all, the universe exists, and it's not very rational to think it made itself.

Steve: Well, maybe. Do you have any other argument?

Jim: Well, to take that a little farther, there is the Cosmological Argument. Everything has a cause, so if you continue to trace back through each cause, you must get to the First Cause, and it is there you find God.

Steve: Is that all you have?

Jim: Oh, no. There's also the Teleological Argument, which says everything must have a designer, such as a watch, for example. Who then designed the complexity of the universe? We must conclude God.

And so the arguments continue but without proving anything, quite frankly. Such arguments no more prove God exists than does the evolutionist's assertion that there was a big bang prove that it happened.

What many advocates of this approach either fail to recognize or refuse to admit is that this is actually the foundation of *Deism*, which every true evangelical, of course, rejects as apostasy. Deists maintain that reason is the essential element in all knowledge and flatly reject both organized and revealed religion. And what is the foundation of their belief? *The logical proofs for God's existence*. The practical outworking of Deism is that while God created the world, He does not intervene or take an active part in it. We must ask, therefore, is this really the approach we should advocate?

Evidential Apologetics

Similar to the classical approach, this one defends the faith through the evidence of the miracles of the Bible, especially the evidences for Christ's resurrection, as well as fulfilled prophecies and scientific evidence for creation. Such an apologetic session might go like this:

Steve: Can you give me any logical evidence that God exists?

Jim: Absolutely. The miracles of the Bible demonstrate it clearly.

Steve: But all that is just a bunch of stories.

Jim: Oh, but the Bible accurately records various cities, customs, and other things that have been verified by outside sources. Besides, such things were recorded by eyewitness.

Steve: Maybe, but such stories, even by eyewitness, could be mistaken, exaggerated, or plagiarized.

Jim: That's not likely. With thousands of Greek manuscripts that essentially say the same thing, that's pretty good evidence that the accounts are reliable.

Steve: Well, I've still got a problem with miracles. That's just not rational thinking.

Jim: But what do you do with all those witnesses?

And again it goes on. It could now go into the historical evidences of Jesus resurrection, creation, and so forth, but nothing is necessarily *proven* in the strict sense of the word because nothing can be *demonstrated*.

Presuppositional Apologetics

This approach abandons the rational method of the preceding approaches. It seeks to prove nothing because nothing can be proven. Why? *Because of a person's presuppositions*. Fallen man is unable to *see* truth much less *believe* it. His sinful mind doesn't even think straight. Unless a person starts with God, he cannot know truth. Oh, yes, he can certainly know that the universe exists, that gravity will kill him if he jumps off a tall building, and so forth, but his presuppositions force him to deny that God made any of it. Proverbs 1:7 seems to clearly indicate just such a reality: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction." Such a conversation with an unbeliever might go like this:

Steve: Can you give me any logical evidence that God exists?

Jim: Actually, no, I can't.

Steve: Why not? How do you expect me to believe anything you say?

Jim: I can't prove anything to you because of your presuppositions.

Steve: What do you mean by that?

Jim: I mean that what you already assume to be true forbids you to look without bias at any evidence I might give you that God exists.

Steve: That's because there *is* no evidence God exists.

Jim: See what I mean? Your mind is already made up and refuses to allow any alternative.

Steve: No, that's not true. I'll believe enough evidence.

Jim: I don't mean to be confrontational, but no you wouldn't. If I told you that 1,000 witnesses saw Jesus rise from the dead, you might say (just as many skeptics have in the past) that it was just mass hys-

teria. If I said that hundreds of Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled, you could say (again like many critics have) that they were forged, post-dated, or whatever. Even if I had a videotape, you'd say it was just special effects. Your presuppositions simply will not allow you to believe.

Steve: Sure I can if you give me enough evidences.

Jim: And how many would that take? No, regardless of how much I offer, you will still say no because your presuppositions absolutely demand it.

Steve: Well, then how can I believe?

That last question is really the heart of the whole issue. How *do* we get someone to believe? This leads us to our main point.

The Application

So how *do* we get someone one to believe? The answer is: *we don't*. Does it not seem quite odd that we think that our well reasoned arguments, however compelling or convincing they might be, can actually persuade someone to believe apart from the power of God? And if it is the power of God that saves, why do we need compelling arguments in the first place? Or is it that we need both?

Please consider this. Our Lord did literally thousands of miracles. Now *there* was positive, irrefutable, convincing proof, right? But did that compel anyone to believe? No. In fact, despite all those miracles, when the Lord Jesus began to preach about righteousness and salvation, and then even had the "audacity" to say that He *alone* is the "bread of life" (Jn. 6:22–71), many left Him (v. 66), just as most people today are offended by the preaching of a narrow Gospel (Matt. 7:13–14; Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:1–12). Our Lord went on to make it clear that it is the Holy Spirit who gives life (v. 63) and "that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father" (v. 65). He went on to add another very unpopular notion nowadays: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (v. 44), indicating that God alone is at work in salvation.

No, it is not arguments that win anybody to Christ, rather it is "the Gospel of Christ" *itself* (the Gospel *in and of itself* without anything added) that is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). Paul, in fact, prefaced that statement with the assertion that he wasn't ashamed of that Gospel, rather he preached *that alone* as God's power.

I fear that just the opposite is true today, that many *are* ashamed of preaching the Gospel alone. I fear that they think that doing so is to be simplistic, naïve, unscholarly, and not socially relevant or intellectually challenging. I also fear that we have become so Arminian, so man-centered in our theology, that we no longer believe that it is God *alone* who performs the *entire* work of salvation.

Paul went on in I Corinthians 1 to deal with this exact situation. Yes, preaching the Gospel alone will be *very* offensive to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (v. 23). What about knowledge, argument, and thought provoking debate? Paul says that "[God] will destroy the wisdom of the wise." What, then, is the power to save? "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (v. 18).

One commentator tells the story of a University of Pennsylvania history professor who read Jonathon Edward's great sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." His motive was to reveal how harsh and morose the Puritans were, but the result was that one student was converted.² *That* is the power of Gospel preaching!

As if that were not enough, Paul goes in 2:1–5 to make the matter even less ambiguous by using his own ministry as an illustration. Now let us not forget that Paul was extremely educated. He was familiar with Greek culture and philosophy. In I Corinthians 15:33, for example, he quotes a proverb that first appeared in a play by the Greek poet Menander (ca. 342–291 BC). He also quotes the semi-mythical 6th Century BC Cretan philosopher-poet and reputed prophet Epimenides in Titus 1:12.

In spite of such education, not to mention an obviously brilliant mind that could have debated the Greek orators in Corinth right out of the forum if he had chosen that methodology, Paul wrote:

I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

What could possibly be clearer than that? The key word is "enticing," which translates the Greek adjective *peithos*, which in-turn comes from the verb *peithō*, "to persuade, prevail upon, win over, or bring about a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations" (e.g., Matt. 27:20).³ He didn't philosophize or debate in the Greek forum. He didn't give any logical proofs for God's existence. He didn't even try to prove Jesus' deity or resurrection. *He just preached the Gospel*. Why? Because saving "faith" is "the power of God," as well as even "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8; see TOTT #15).

At this point, some teachers immediately bring up Acts 19:8, where Paul "went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God." They insist that since "persuading" is also *peitho*, then this proves that Paul was doing "apologetics." We submit,

however, that if that is true, we have a serious contradiction, for what Paul did there in the lecture hall at Ephesus was the very thing he said he refused to do in Corinth. Please read it again. What he was doing in Ephesus was debating with the Jews concerning the *kingdom*, a focal point for the Jews, *not* the existence of God or other such apologetic subject. This verse simply does not justify modern apologetics.

I was blessed in the depths of my soul by these simple words from the beloved J. Vernon McGee:

There are many people today who try to prove that the Bible is the Word of God. There are also those who try to prove that the Bible is not God's Word. My ministry at the beginning was an apologetic ministry. I tried to prove that the Bible was the Word of God. I learned, however, that I do not need to prove it; I am to give it out, and the Spirit of God takes care of that. I have already come to the definite, dogmatic conclusion that the Bible is indeed the Word of God. I don't *think* it is—I *know* it is. And I know what it can do for you today. Therefore it does not need my weak support. The Bible will take care of itself.⁴

It would appear that Charles Spurgeon agreed. When asked one day how he would defend the Bible, he replied, "Defend the Bible? I would just as soon defend a lion. Just turn the Bible loose. It will defend itself."

We come full circle back to our main text. What does Peter mean when he says **be ready always to give an answer to every man**? John Gill well explains:

Now, a "reason" of this is to be given; not that they are to account for the Gospel, upon the foot of carnal reason; for that is not of men, nor according to the carnal reason of men; nor is it to be thought that every Christian should be capable of defending the Gospel, either in whole, or in part, by arguments and reasons, in a disputatious way, or to give a reason and argument for every particular truth; but that he should be *well acquainted with the ground and foundation of the Christian religion*; at least, with the first principles of *the oracles of God*, and be *conversant with the Scriptures*, and be able to point out that in them, which is the reason of his holding this and the other truth, though he is not able to give a gainsayer satisfaction, or to stop his mouth: and this is to be done with meekness and fear; with meekness, before men; in an humble modest way; not with an haughty air, and in a morose and surly manner, which serves only to irritate and provoke.⁵

In other words, we don't use *reason*; we use *revelation*. We don't *debate* the issues in arrogance; we *deliver* the truth in humility. One of the tendencies in modern apologetics is to think our arguments are actually helpful, or to

word it even more spiritually, "God uses our arguments." *But where does Scripture say that?* Further, it is extremely easy for us to become puffed up in our knowledge and think that we are responsible for "winning someone to Christ."

We should also address another use of *apologia*: "I am set for the defence of the gospel" (Phil. 1:17). What does this mean? Does it imply the modern idea? Hardly. Lehman Strauss well puts it:

I have heard it said that the gospel needs no defense. No doubt there is some truth in that statement, but certainly there needs to be a defense against the misrepresentations of the gospel. . . . The full truth should be preached with singleness and purity of purpose.⁶

Paul was not talking about argumentation and proof-preaching, rather defending the preaching of the true Gospel. What we should be doing today is defending the true Gospel in light of how it is being diluted and perverted by so many teachers. Those are the people who are doing the greatest damage, not the foolish evolutionist and atheist. If I may be so blunt, it is the Joel Osteens and Robert Schullers that are destroying the Gospel message.

I am convinced, in fact, that at least part of this issue has to do with our no longer knowing what the Gospel is and exactly what it is we are to be proclaiming. The Gospel is not about proving God's existence or demonstrating evolution to be ridiculous (not to mention "meeting people's felt needs"). Scripture doesn't try to do any of that. Genesis 1:1 states that God created the universe and makes no attempt to prove either that fact or even God's existence. The only verses that can possibly be defined as "apologetic" (in the modern sense of the word) are ones such as, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1), and, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). That is "proof enough." Anyone, therefore, who rejects that glaringly obvious truth, who defiantly rejects the God of the universe, is a helpless, hopeless, and hapless *fool* (Ps. 14:1).

So strong is the word "fool" in that verse, in fact, that it is the third level of fool in the Hebrew. The first (*'ewil*) is the person who is thick-brained, likes to argue, and despises instruction (Prov. 1:7; 12:15; 20:3). The second (*kesil*) is the dull, obstinate fellow who even if you put truth right in front of his eyes, he will not see it (17:24). But here the fool is *nābāl*, which adds to the others the idea of "an arrogant bore," a totally insensitive, immoral, and ungracious person. He speaks well of nothing (Prov. 17:7), is a disgrace to all that is good (Ps. 74:22), and his mind is closed. Again, even though all creation loudly proclaims not only God's *existence*, but also His eternal,

sovereign *power* and even *Godhead*, that is, His glorious character and attributes (Rom. 1:20), this depraved, obstinate wretch shakes his fist and says, "There is no God." Such people willfully refuse (because of their presuppositions) "to retain God in their knowledge" (1:28). Should we actually give such people an open forum for their blasphemy? They already own our school campuses and monopolize the news media. Why empower them further?

What, then, are we to do? *We are to proclaim the Gospel*. We are to *tell* the lost that they *are* lost, that they have sinned against a holy God, and are destined for an eternity in hell. We are to tell them that Jesus Christ alone is "the way, the truth, and the life" and that "no man cometh unto the Father, but by [Him]" (Jn. 14:6), for "neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). We must boldly proclaim that only in Him is there "forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14).

Now, should we know the arguments of the unbeliever? Should we know how they will attack? Should we equip our church people and our children for the dangers that exist? Of course! Any military man knows the importance of knowing his enemy. But our answer must always be, "Thus saith the Lord," not, "So says science."

Are apologetics worthless and a waste of time, effort, and brain storage? Absolutely not! They are a wonderful blessing to the Christian heart. I am fascinated, for example, by fulfilled Bible prophecy. My favorite example is how it has proven the accuracy of the prophecy against the city of Tyre (Ezek. 26) and how Alexander's conquest fulfilled it to the letter. Archaeology is also a great blessing; the existence of many biblical cities has been proven

by the archeologist's spade, such as, Ur of the Chaldees and the cliff city of Petra. Further, as a backyard astronomer, every deep space object I observe gives me joy in how it "[declares] the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1).

But none of that saves anyone. The only hope man has is regeneration. He will know nothing apart from God. It is our responsibility, therefore, as God's Word declares, to "plant" the seed and "water" the seed, but it is the Sovereign God who will "[give] the increase." We are nothing; He is everything (I Cor. 3: 6-7).

One writer, who oddly enough is an evidentialist, puts it well: "Some people say the best offense is a good defense, but I say unto you that the best defense is a good offense. . . . The best defense of Christianity is a clear, simple presentation of the claims of Christ and who He is in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁷ Let's leave it there.

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NOTES

- ¹ R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, *Classic Apologetics* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 13.
- ² Gordon Clark, *Philippians* (The Trinity Foundation, 1996), p. 29.
- ³ *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*.
- ⁴ *Thru the Bible* (electronic edition), comment on Neh. 3:26 (emphasis in the original).
- ⁵ *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (emphasis added).
- ⁶ Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Philippians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1959), p. 72.
- ⁷ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. xxxi.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: "The Sealing of Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14)." This sadly neglected and misunderstood doctrine is one that is vital for the Christian's understanding of security and assurance. In a two-part study, we will go deeper than do most theology books to explain this important truth.

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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