

Mere
APOLOGETICS

HOW TO HELP SEEKERS
AND SKEPTICS FIND FAITH

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Introduction

This book is an introduction to apologetics—the field of Christian thought that focuses on the justification of the core themes of the Christian faith and its effective communication to the non-Christian world. It commends a mindset of *engagement*, encouraging Christians to interact with the ideas of our culture rather than running away from them or pretending they can be ignored. Apologetics aims to convert believers into thinkers, and thinkers into believers. It engages our reason, our imagination, and our deepest longings. It opens hearts, eyes, and minds. As the great apologist G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) once quipped, “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.”¹ Apologetics celebrates and proclaims the intellectual solidity, the imaginative richness, and the spiritual depth of the gospel in ways that can connect with our culture.

Apologetics is to be seen not as a defensive and hostile reaction against the world, but as a welcome opportunity to exhibit, celebrate, and display the treasure chest of the Christian faith. It encourages believers to appreciate their faith, and to explain and commend it to those outside the church. It aims to set out the intellectual, moral, imaginative, and relational richness of the Christian faith—partly to reassure believers and help them develop their faith, but primarily to enable those outside the community of faith to realize the compelling vision that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.

This book sets out to introduce its readers to the leading themes of apologetics, presenting a basic understanding of its agendas and approaches. I have tried to make this book accessible, interesting, and useful, while giving pointers to more advanced resources that will allow you, the reader, to take things further in your own time. It is not comprehensive, so you will need to supplement it with more advanced and specialized texts. Nor is it committed to any particular school of apologetics. Rather than limiting itself to any one specific school or approach to apologetics, this work draws on their collective riches. It aims to encourage and equip its readers to develop an apologetic mindset, and explore further how to explain and commend the gospel to our culture. In many ways, the book's approach mirrors that of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), perhaps the greatest apologist of the twentieth century. It aims to help you get an idea of what the issues are and how Christians can respond to them. Like any introduction, it will leave you wanting to know more and go further. It cannot hope to answer all of your questions!

All the material used in this book has been tested on student audiences and in public addresses over a period of six years, primarily in a foundational lecture course I teach at the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics entitled “An Introduction to Christian Apologetics.” This has been supplemented by material developed for summer schools in Oxford and at Regent College, Vancouver, dealing with the central themes of apologetics and how they enable the church to engage positively and powerfully with the questions our culture is asking. I am deeply grateful to my students for their feedback, ideas, and stimulus, which have been so important to me in developing the approach set out in this book. I hope it will help others to discover why apologetics is so interesting on the one hand, and so vital to the future of the Christian faith on the other.

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Getting Started

WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

The Great Commission gives every Christian the privilege and responsibility of preaching the Good News until the end of history: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18–20 NIV). Every Christian alive today is linked, through a complex chain of historical events, with this pivotal moment. Each of us has a family tree of faith reaching back into the mists of time. Down the ages, like runners in a great relay race of history, others have passed this Good News from one generation to another. And now the baton has been handed to us. It's our turn. We have been entrusted with passing on the Good News to those around and beyond us.

It is an exciting thought. For a start, it helps us to see how we fit into a bigger picture. Yet for many it is also a rather challenging thought. It seems too big a demand. Are we really up for this? How can we cope with such a weighty responsibility? It is important to realize that Christians have always felt overwhelmed by the challenges of passing on our faith. We feel that we lack the wisdom, insight, and strength to do this—and we are right to feel so. But we must appreciate that God knows us, exactly as we are (Ps. 139). He knows our deepest secrets, our strengths, and our weaknesses. And God is able to work in us and through us to speak to the world for which Christ died.

One of the great themes of the Christian Bible is that, whenever God asks us to do something for him, he gives us the gifts we need to do it. Knowing us for what we are, he equips us for what he wants us to do. The Great Commission includes both a command and a promise. The risen Christ's *command* to his disciples is bold and challenging: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19 NIV). His *promise* to those disciples is equally reassuring and encouraging: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (v. 20 NIV). It is a deeply comforting thought. We are not on our own. The risen Christ stands by us and with us, as we do our best to hand on and hand over the Good News of who Christ is and what he has done for us.

Yet knowing that we are accompanied and strengthened in our journey of faith by the risen Christ does not solve the many questions we must face and explore as we commend and proclaim the gospel. How can anyone do justice to the excitement, joy, and wonder of the Christian gospel? Time and time again, we find ourselves unable to express its richness adequately in words. The reality of God and the gospel always exceeds our ability to express it. How can we respond effectively to the questions our culture is asking about God, or the objections it raises to faith? How can we find vivid, faithful, and dynamic ways of explaining and expressing the gospel, allowing it to connect with the hopes and fears of those around us?

How can Christians explain their faith in terms that make sense to people outside the church? How can we counter misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the Christian faith? How can we communicate the truth, attractiveness, and joy of the Christian gospel to our culture? These are questions that have been addressed by Christians since the time of the New Testament. Traditionally, this is known as the discipline of *apologetics*—the subject of this book.

Defining Apologetics

So what is apologetics? Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the Christian church's greatest theologians, is widely admired as a biblical interpreter, a preacher, and an expositor of the grace of God. One of his most significant contributions to the development of

Christian theology is his reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity. As readers will know, this doctrine often causes difficulties for people. Augustine, however, had his own problem with the formula "three persons, one God." Why, he complained, did Christians use the word "person" here? It just wasn't helpful. Surely there had to be a better word to use. In the end, Augustine came to the conclusion that there probably wasn't, and the church would just have to keep on using the word "person" in this way.

I often feel like that when using the term "apologetics." It doesn't seem to be a very helpful word. For most people it suggests the idea of "saying you're sorry." Now I am sure there is much that the Christian church needs to say it's sorry about. But that's not really what apologetics is all about. As if that's not enough, the word "apologetics" sounds as if it's plural—but it's really singular (like "scissors"). Yet while Christian writers have sought alternative terms down the ages, none really seems to have caught on. We're just going to have to keep on using "apologetics." But if we can't change the word, we can make sure we understand its richness of meaning.

The term "apologetics" makes a lot more sense when we consider the meaning of the Greek word on which it is based—*apologia*. An *apologia* is a "defense," a reasoned case proving the innocence of an accused person in court, or a demonstration of the correctness of an argument or belief. We find this term used in 1 Peter 3:15, which many see as a classic biblical statement of the importance of apologetics:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason [*logos*] for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (NIV)

It is an important text, worth reading in its full context. The first letter of Peter is addressed to Christians in the region of the Roman Empire known as Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Peter offers them reassurance and comfort as they face the threat of persecution. He encourages them to engage their critics and questioners by explaining the basis and content of their faith with gentleness and respect.

Peter clearly assumes that Christian ideas are being misunderstood or misrepresented, and urges his readers to set the record straight—but to do so graciously and considerately. For Peter, apologetics is about defending the truth with gentleness and respect. The object of apologetics is not to antagonize or humiliate those outside the church, but to help open their eyes to the reality, reliability, and relevance of the Christian faith. There must be no mismatch or contradiction between the message that is proclaimed and the tone of the messenger's proclamation. We must be winsome, generous, and gracious. If the gospel is to cause difficulty, it must be on account of its intrinsic nature and content, not the manner in which it is proclaimed.¹ It is one thing for the gospel to give offense; it is quite another for its defenders to cause offense by unwise choice of language or an aggressive and dismissive attitude toward outsiders.

Christians have taken this advice seriously from the earliest days of the church. The New Testament itself contains several important passages—mostly in the Acts of the Apostles—that explain, commend, and defend the Christian faith to a variety of audiences. For example, Peter's famous sermon on the day of Pentecost argues that Jesus of Nazareth is the culmination of the hopes of Israel (Acts 2). Paul's equally famous sermon to the philosophers of Athens argues that Jesus of Nazareth is the culmination of the long human quest for wisdom (Acts 17).

This engagement continued throughout the history of the church. Early Christian writers were especially concerned to engage Platonism. How could they communicate the truth and power of the gospel to an audience used to thinking in Platonic ways? This approach involved the identification of both possibilities and challenges, leading to the exploitation of those possibilities and the neutralization of those challenges. Yet Platonism generally fell out of fashion in the early Middle Ages. Aristotle became the philosopher of choice in most western universities from the thirteenth century until the early sixteenth century. Once more, Christian apologists rose to this challenge. They identified the challenges raised by Aristotelianism—such as its belief in the eternity of the world. And they also identified the openings it created for faith. That task continues today, as we face new intellectual and cultural

challenges and opportunities. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenges arising from cultural changes—and so fail to see the opportunities they offer.

The Basic Themes of Christian Apologetics

Before exploring these possibilities, we need to think a little more about the nature of apologetics. What issues does it engage? How does it help us proclaim and communicate the gospel? We could summarize the three tasks faced by apologists of the past and present under three main headings: defending, commending, and translating.

Defending

Here, the apologist sets out to find the barriers to faith. Have they arisen through misunderstandings or misrepresentations? If so, these need to be corrected. Have they arisen because of a genuine difficulty over Christian truth claims? If so, these need to be addressed. It is important to note that defense is generally a reactive strategy. Someone comes up with a concern; we are obliged to respond to it. Happily, there are excellent responses that can be made, and the apologist needs to know and understand these. Where honest questions are sincerely asked, honest answers must be powerfully yet graciously given.

Yet everyone has different questions, concerns, and anxieties. As a result, the apologist needs to know her audience. What are the difficulties people experience with the Christian gospel? One of the first things that the apologist learns when he does apologetics—as opposed to just reading books about it—is that audiences vary enormously. Each person has his or her own specific difficulties about faith and must not be reduced to a generalized stereotype.

These difficulties are often intellectual, concerning questions about the evidential basis for faith or some core Christian doctrines. But it is important to realize that not all of these difficulties fall into this category. Some are much deeper concerns, and are not so much about problems with rational understanding as about problems with existential commitment. French apologist Blaise Pascal (1623–62)

once perceptively commented: "The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing about." Apologetics aims to identify these barriers to faith, whatever their nature, and offer responses that help to overcome them.

Apologetics thus encourages Christians to develop a "discipleship of the mind." Before we can answer the questions others ask us about our faith, we need to have answered them for ourselves. Christ calls on his followers to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind (Matt. 22:37). Paul also speaks about the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2) as part of the process of transforming our lives. To be a Christian is to think about our faith, beginning to forge answers to our own questions. Apologetics is about going further and deeper into the Christian faith, discovering its riches. It's good for our own appreciation of the richness and reasonableness of our faith. But, perhaps just as importantly, it enables us to deal with the questions that others have.

It is also important to appreciate that it is not just people outside the church who are asking questions about faith. Many Christians also experience difficulties with their faith and find themselves looking for explanations or approaches that will help them sustain it. While the primary focus of apologetics may indeed be culture at large, we must never forget that many Christians need help with their faith. Why does God allow suffering? How can I make sense of the Trinity? Will my pets go to heaven when they die? These are all apologetic questions familiar to any pastor. And they need to be answered. Happily, there are indeed answers that are deeply rooted in the long Christian tradition of engaging Scripture.

It is important for Christians to show that they understand these concerns, and don't see them simply as arguments to be lightly and easily dismissed. We need to deal with them sensitively and compassionately, entering into the mind of the person who finds them a problem. Why is it a problem? What have you seen that they haven't? How can you help them see things in a new way that either neutralizes the problem or makes it clear this is a problem they're already well used to in other areas of life? It is important not to be dismissive, but gracious and sympathetic. Apologetics is as much about our personal attitudes and character as it is about our arguments and analysis. You can defend the gospel without being defensive in your attitude.

Commending

Here, the apologist sets out to allow the truth and relevance of the gospel to be appreciated by the audience. The audience may be a single person or a large group of people. In each case, the apologist will try to allow the full wonder and brilliance of the Christian faith to be understood and appreciated. The gospel does not need to be made relevant to these audiences. The question is how we help the audience grasp this relevance—for example, by using helpful illustrations, analogies, or stories that allow them to connect with it.

Apologetics thus has a strongly positive dimension—setting out the full attractiveness of Jesus Christ so that those outside the faith can begin to grasp why he merits such serious consideration. Christ himself once compared the kingdom of heaven to a pearl of great price: "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:45–46 NIV). The merchant knew about pearls, and he could see that this particular pearl was so beautiful and valuable it was worth giving up everything so he could possess it.

As we shall see, one classic way of doing this is to show that Christianity is rationally compelling. It makes better sense of things than its rivals. Yet it is vitally important not to limit the appeal of the gospel to human reason. What of the human heart? Time after time, the Gospels tell us people were drawn to Jesus of Nazareth because they realized he could transform their lives. While arguments are important in apologetics, they have their limits. Many are attracted to the Christian faith today because of their belief that it will change their lives. Their criterion of validation is not so much "Is this true?" but "Will this work?"

Our task is to help people realize that the Christian faith is so exciting and wonderful that nothing else can compare to it. This means helping people grasp the attractiveness of the faith. Theology allows us to identify and appreciate the individual elements of the Christian faith. It is like someone opening a treasure chest and holding up jewels, pearls, and precious metals, one by one, so that each may be seen individually and appreciated. It is like holding a diamond up to the light, so that each of its facets scintillates, allowing its beauty and glory to be appreciated.

Translating

Here, the apologist recognizes that many of the core ideas and themes of the Christian faith are likely to be unfamiliar to many audiences. They need to be explained using familiar or accessible images, terms, or stories. C. S. Lewis is rightly regarded as a master of this skill, and his estimation of its importance must be taken to heart:

We must learn the language of our audience. And let me say at the outset that it is no use laying down *a priori* what the “plain man” does or does not understand. You have to find out by experience. . . . You must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. . . . I have come to the conclusion that if you cannot translate your own thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts are confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood your own meaning.²

The issue here is about how we faithfully and effectively communicate the Christian faith to a culture that may not understand traditional Christian terms or concepts. We need to be able to set out and explain the deep attraction of the Christian gospel for our culture, using language and images it can access. It is no accident that Christ used parables to teach about the kingdom of God. He used language and imagery already familiar to the rural Palestinian culture of his age to communicate deeper spiritual truths.

So how can we translate core ideas of the Christian faith—such as redemption and salvation—into the cultural vernacular? Biblical terms need to be explained and interpreted if they are to resonate with where people are today. An example will make this point clearer. Paul declares that “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1 NIV). This is clearly a statement of a core element of the Christian gospel. But it will not be understood by contemporary audiences, who will probably misunderstand Paul’s central notion of “justification” in one of two ways:

1. A defense of our integrity or “rightness,” in the sense of “I provided a justification of my actions to my employers.” It’s about showing that we are right.

2. The alignment of the text against the right-hand margin of a document, particularly when word processing. It’s about straightening up a ragged text.

Neither of these really illuminates Paul’s meaning in Romans 5:1; indeed, it could be argued that both definitions are likely to mislead people about his intentions and concerns. Paul’s idea of justification thus needs to be explained in terms that are both faithful to his original intention and intelligible to contemporary audiences. One might, for example, begin to explain this by talking about being “put right” with God, allowing both the relational and judicial aspects of the concept of justification to be explored.

From what has been said thus far, it is clear that apologetics is concerned with three themes, each of which brings new depth to our personal faith and a new quality to our Christian witness:

1. Identifying and responding to objections or difficulties concerning the gospel, and helping to overcome these barriers to faith.
2. Communicating the excitement and wonder of the Christian faith, so that its potential to transform the human situation can be appreciated.
3. Translating the core ideas of the Christian faith into language that makes sense to outsiders.

We shall be considering each of these issues in greater depth later in the book. We now need to consider how apologetics relates to evangelism.

Apologetics and Evangelism

From what has just been said, it can be seen that Christian apologetics represents a serious and sustained engagement with the “ultimate questions” raised by a culture, people group, or individual, aiming to show how the Christian faith is able to provide meaningful answers to such questions. Where is God in the suffering of the world? Is faith in God reasonable? Apologetics clears the ground for evangelism, just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

Evangelism moves beyond this attempt to demonstrate the cultural plausibility of the Christian faith. Where apologetics can be considered to clear the ground for faith in Christ, evangelism invites people to respond to the gospel. Where apologetics aims to secure *consent*, evangelism aims to secure *commitment*. David Bosch's influential and widely accepted definition of evangelism makes this point well:

Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sins, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.³

Developing this same approach, we might say that apologetics aims to establish the plausibility of salvation in Christ—for example, by developing an intellectual case based on cultural history for the fallenness or sinfulness of humanity, or by appealing to the experience of spiritual longing as a sign of alienation from God and our true destiny. The task of apologetics is therefore to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, just as someone might clear rocks and other roadblocks from a pathway.

The dividing line between apologetics and evangelism is fuzzy; making a distinction between them, however, is helpful. Apologetics is conversational, where evangelism is invitational.⁴ While an apologetic conversation about the Christian faith can easily lead into an invitation to faith, it is much more concerned with removing misunderstandings, explaining ideas, and exploring the personal relevance of faith. Apologetics is about persuading people that there is a door to another world—a door that perhaps they never realized existed. Evangelism is about helping people to open that door and enter into the new world that lies beyond.

A rough working definition of evangelism might be “inviting someone to become a Christian.” Apologetics could then be thought of as clearing the ground for that invitation so that it is more likely to receive a positive response. Or again, evangelism could be said to be like offering someone bread. Apologetics would then be about persuading people there is bread to be had and it is good to eat.

An example may help make this point clearer. Jesus of Nazareth often compared the kingdom of God to a feast (Luke 14:15–24). Apologetics can be thought of as explaining to people that there really is going to be a feast. It invites them to reflect on what they might find there—the food and the drink. How wonderful it would be to be invited! If only this were true! As Blaise Pascal once quipped, we must “make good people wish that [the Christian faith] were true, and then show that it is.”⁵ Pascal's point is that we ought to help people long for what the Christian faith promises—and then show them it is indeed true and real. The desire for something provides the motivation to check it out.

Evangelism is different. It issues a personal invitation: “You are invited to the feast! Please come!” Apologetics lays the ground for this invitation; evangelism extends it. Both are an essential part of the mission of the church. Apologetics establishes and proclaims the plausibility and desirability of the gospel; evangelism summons people to enter into it and share in its benefits. Apologetics is not evangelism, and is inadequate without it. Yet it has an important and distinct role to play in the Christian community's engagement with the world, as well as in encouraging and developing the faith of Christian believers.

However, there are potential difficulties with apologetics that need to be identified. Every tool needs to be calibrated to make sure that we understand its strengths and weaknesses. We need to know the conditions under which it works well, and when it is likely to go wrong. We shall consider this matter in the next section.

The Limitations of Apologetics

When properly understood and properly used, apologetics is of vital importance to the ministry of the church. It can bring a new quality and intellectual depth to the life of ordinary believers, equipping them to answer their own questions about their faith and those asked by their friends. And it helps us build bridges to our culture, preparing the way for the gospel proclamation. Yet apologetics can easily be misunderstood and just as easily misapplied.

One of the things apologetics aims to do is translate key ideas of the Christian faith into categories the world can understand. For example, some biblical terms—such as justification—need to be interpreted to

secular culture, as they are liable to be misunderstood. Yet although this process of “cultural translation” of key gospel ideas can be enormously important in helping people understand what the Christian faith is all about, it can lead to two unhelpful outcomes.

First, translation into cultural terms can easily lead to Christian ideas being reduced to their cultural equivalents. For example, it is helpful to think of Jesus Christ as the mediator between humanity and God, and there is excellent New Testament warrant for speaking of Christ in this way. It helps identify what is so important about Christ from a Christian perspective. Yet modern western culture understands a “mediator” in a professional sense—someone experienced at conflict resolution who is asked to sort out a dispute between two parties. Speaking of Jesus Christ as mediator risks reducing his role to what contemporary culture understands by the idea—for example, Jesus as the peacemaker. We need to make sure we do not reduce Jesus Christ or the Christian gospel to terms our culture can understand. Apologetics can lead to loss of distinctive Christian identity.

This can, of course, be avoided by making it clear that apologetics is aiming to establish bridges with contemporary culture. In the end, the gospel is not something that can or should be reduced to western cultural norms. Rather, it is something whose truth and relevance can be more effectively communicated through the judicious choice and use of cultural analogies, values, or stories. But it is not the same as any of these. We can use phrases such as “It’s a bit like . . .” But in the end, we have to realize that the gospel transcends and transforms any and all cultural ideas we may use as channels for its communication. These are vehicles and channels for the gospel; they are not the gospel itself.

Second, apologetics runs the risk of creating the impression that showing the reasonableness of faith is all that is required. This is one of the reasons to emphasize the importance of evangelism. To use an analogy found in the writings of Martin Luther, faith is like getting into a boat and crossing the sea to an island. Apologetics can help establish that it is reasonable to believe there is a boat, that it is likely to be safe to travel in, and that there is an island just beyond the horizon. But you still need to get in the boat and travel to the island. Faith is about commitment to God, not just belief in God. Once more, this is a difficulty that can be avoided by realizing apologetics and evangelism are essential and interconnected partners in Christian outreach.

Moving On

In this opening chapter, we have reflected on some basic themes of Christian apologetics. How are we to relate the Christian faith to contemporary culture? As we shall see at various points throughout this work, one of the best ways of doing this is to make sure we have really understood the Christian faith, and appreciated its intellectual, relational, aesthetic, imaginative, and ethical appeal. There is much to appreciate!

Yet we also need to reflect on the cultural context within which we proclaim, explain, and commend the gospel. People do not exist in cultural vacuums. They live in a specific situation, and often absorb at least some of its ideas and values. In the next chapter, we shall begin to reflect on the role played by culture in apologetics.

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