

# ***An Introduction to Apologetics ~ Tools for answering Questions of Faith from your colleagues***

*(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)*

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## **Introduction**

Have you ever had to listen to “evangelism” from a Jehovah’s Witness or a Mormon at your front door or on the street?

If so, consider the following:

- a. What was your attitude as you listened to them?
- b. When you walked away were you changed, challenged or convinced?
- c. Why did you remain “unconverted” to their argument?
- d. What were the barriers to believing their argument? Was it any of the following?
  - Couldn’t understand?
  - Don’t share the same worldview?
  - Your starting point is oppositional?
  - Don’t know them (cf. an electricity salesperson at your door)?

Now put yourself in the shoes of a non-believer who is listening to you preach/talk. What might their attitude be? What might be their barriers to belief?

This is where apologetics becomes important. Because we know we’re not preaching at blank slates.

People come to us with:

- presuppositions
- worldviews
- minds made up
- hearts set
- barriers

*And apologetics helps us to address all of these.*

## **A. WHAT IS ‘APOLOGETICS’?**

### **1. What does the word ‘apologetics’ mean?**

The word ‘apologetics’ is from the Greek *apologia*, which means ‘defence’. It is what you give in a court to defend yourself.

- Socrates gave his famous ‘apology’ to the court of Athens
- Paul “*defended himself*” (ἀπολογεομαι, *apologeomai*) before the Roman officials (Acts 24:10; 25:8)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Then Paul made his defence (*apologeomai*): ‘I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.’” (Acts 25:8)

## 2. What is the concept of ‘apologetics’?

“Apologetics is the systematic response of the reflective and culturally informed Christian to attacks that inevitably come upon the truth-claims of the Christian faith” (Mark Hanna).

### **The What**

Defending or making a case for the truth of the Christian faith.

### **The Why**

- a. Strengthens the faith of Christian believers.<sup>2</sup>  
Apologetics for believers is *belief sustaining*; it nurtures Christian faith by calling believers to love their Lord with their minds (Matt 22:37)<sup>3</sup>.
- b. Removes obstacles to faith (pre-evangelism)<sup>4</sup>.
- c. Enables us to communicate the Gospel to non-believers.  
Apologetics for non-believers is *belief forming*; it helps to defuse attacks upon Christianity, and to establish Christianity as credible by giving intellectual support to the explanatory value of a biblical world view<sup>5</sup>.
- d. People have presuppositions and worldviews that need to be acknowledged and addressed.
- e. God commands us to give answers to unbelievers' questions (1 Pet 3:15; Jude 3; Tit 1:9).  
Unbelievers have good questions; we have good answers; God commands us to give them the answers<sup>6</sup>.

### **The How**

- a. Refuting objections against the Christian faith → negative or defensive apologetics.
- b. Offering positive reasons for the Christian faith → positive or offensive apologetics.

Notice how Tim Keller’s book, *The Reason for God*, is divided into:

- Part 1 - Negative/Defensive; and
- Part 2 - Positive/Offensive.

## 3. How do I do ‘apologetics’?

1 Peter 3:15, “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

You’ll notice that there are three components to this:

1. Your Christian character (which is the context of this verse);
2. The reasons of your answer;
3. The manner in which you answer.

questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenceless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart sceptic. ... Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts – not only their own but their friends' and neighbours'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to sceptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive.”

<sup>3</sup> W.G Phillips, ‘Apologetics’, in W.A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2007). 82

<sup>4</sup> Examples of pre-evangelism: Moses in Gen 1, Elijah at Mount Carmel, Jesus with the woman at the well, Paul in at least four occasions (Acts 14:8-18; 17:16-34; 24:5-21; 26:1-29)

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, ‘Apologetics’, 82

<sup>6</sup> Norman L. Geisler, Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask. A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2008) 11-12

## **B. WHY SHOULD I USE APOLOGETICS IN MY EVANGELISM?**

### **1. People have plausibility structures**

Consider the following examples:

- Imagine I said to you, “Aliens landed in our backyard last night and took my wife and I back to planet Saturn to join them for dinner and a movie.” What would you think? That this is implausible?
- Now imagine I said to you, “Jesus Christ died and rose again three days later, and will one day come again”. What would you think? Just as implausible?

People have plausibility structures through which statements are filtered. *It’s a grid that we use to pre-judge whether or not something is believable.*

Where do these come from? This is a whole new section in epistemology, but it’s a combination of:

- a. People we trust (most influential);
- b. Community;
- c. Experience;
- d. Evidence.

What this means is that people will not believe you, until you acknowledge and dismantle their plausibility structures.

### **2. People have defeater beliefs**

Our plausibility structures consist of defeater beliefs. A “*defeater belief*” *defeats whatever belief you try to give someone.*

For example, if someone claimed to have been taken by a UFO, your defeater beliefs might be:

- There are no such thing as UFOs;
- People who claim to have been taken by aliens are usually on the fringes of society;
- There are no extra-terrestrial intelligent life forms.

When you preach the Gospel to people, they also have defeater beliefs. According to Tim Keller, there are 6 basic defeater beliefs pervasive in modern western culture:

- 1) Other religions - there can’t only be one true religion
- 2) Evil and Suffering
- 3) The Sacredness of Choice
- 4) The Record of Christians
- 5) The Angry God
- 6) The Unreliable Bible

Therefore if you want an individual to consider concepts and ideas you hold you must:

- Understand, empathise and address the held defeater beliefs;
- Dismantle the held plausibility structures;
- Keep in mind there’s little point in just providing more evidence.

### **3. People have to believe at both the level of heart and mind**

In the end, both *evidence* and *presuppositions* determine belief.  
*Evidence* affects how people think (cognitively).  
*Presuppositions* affect how people feel about the evidence (existentially).

Example 1: Was the Iraq War justified? If:

Evidence → no Weapons of Mass Destruction found, no link with September 11 found;

Presuppositions → Saddam is evil, God is on America's side, my son is in the military, etc;

Then evidence might show the war is not justified; but in my heart, I will want to believe that the war is justified.

Example 2: The Gun Control Debate – should the use of guns be regulated by the government? If:

Evidence → Every year there are 30,000-50,000 gun related deaths in the USA;

Presuppositions → Gun-ownership is a right, we need guns to resist a dictatorship;

Then evidence might show that guns cause a lot of unnecessary deaths; but in my heart, I don't want guns to be registered.

**So...** You can't just present raw evidence.  
You also need to address people's presuppositions.

#### 4. **We have to win over their hearts and minds**

As people sit there listening to you, they are not going to hear what you say because:

- a. They may think there is evidence against what you say (or no evidence for what you say); and/or
- b. They may feel that they will have to change their worldviews if they are to believe you.

Thus, when we preach, we have to acknowledge both what people are *thinking* and *feeling*.

Example 1: During a sermon a person may ask, "Is my Grandmother in Hell right now?" The preacher needs to keep in mind:

Evidence → Jesus says he is the only way; Jesus talks about Hell, etc; and

The listeners presuppositions → 'I can't bear to think that my grandmother is in Hell'.

The preacher needs to primarily address the presuppositions. Raw evidence will not compel belief.

Note, this is why today people get their news from sources that they agree with. They want to listen to who they already agree with → creating existential and emotional alignment with themselves.

### C. **APOLOGETICS 'STRATEGIES'**

#### ***An Important Debate***

You have heard of Coke versus Pepsi, Ford versus Holden...

In the Apologetics world the debate is, 'Evidentialism versus presuppositionalism'.<sup>7</sup>

Christian apologists disagree over how the fallenness of humanity affects the role of the mind in regeneration (the 'noetic' effects of sin). This disagreement is reflected in different apologetic methodologies which attempt to penetrate the presuppositions of the non-Christian.<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. **Strategy One: Evidentialism**

This position is very optimistic of the enterprise of apologetics and presupposes human reason is capable of understanding the things of God despite the fall.

**Basis:** The truth-claims of Christianity are judged credible using the same standards by which all truth-claims are judged credible (e.g. scientific hypotheses, historical facts), and those standards are external to Scripture.

What are these evidences exactly?

- a. 'Proofs' of God's existence
- b. historical reliability of NT documents
- c. life and teachings of Jesus Christ
- d. evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ
- e. the external consistency of the Christian worldview
- f. the internal consistency of the Christian worldview
- g. the history of the Christian Church
- h. the testimony of other Christians
- i. my own testimony

Thus, Christian faith is rendered worthy of belief by external criteria, such as reason (rationalism) and evidences (empiricism), etc. One should not believe anything unless there is sufficient evidence or reason for it ("I understand, therefore I believe").

Here, apologetics is the presentation of perspicuous evidences to the unregenerate mind, which is capable of responding positively to this message.<sup>10</sup>

***The main proponents:***

William Lane Craig  
 R. C. Sproul  
 Norman Geisler  
 Stephen T. Davis  
 Richard Swinburne

***Strengths***

The Bible has examples of where evidence is used to demonstrate truth claims:

Peter's instruction:

*"Always be prepared to give an answer ... the reason for the hope you have"* (1 Peter 3:15)

Jesus to John the Baptist (via his disciples):

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see ..."* (Matt 11:4)

Jesus to the religious authorities:

*"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ..."*  
 (Mk 2:10)

The disciple John *"saw and believed"* (John 20:8)

Jesus lets Thomas see and touch his wounds:

*"Stop doubting and believe."* (John 20:27)

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<sup>9</sup> Phillips, 'Apologetics', 84

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 84

John's conclusion to his letter:

*"Jesus did many other miraculous signs ... which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."* (John 20:30-31)

Paul's appeal to natural evidence in Lystra:

*"Yet [God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."* (Acts 14:17)

Paul in the Areopagus at Athens:

*"From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him."*

(Acts 17:26-27)

### **Weaknesses**

- a. What about the non-believer's prior presuppositions?
  - presuppositions affect how you interpret the evidence (e.g., an atheist and theist looking at the stars conclude two different things about how the stars came to be);
  - "There is no such thing as a naked fact" (D. B. Knox)
- b. Can evidence compel belief?
- c. Can you 'prove' God? And would this be the Christian God anyway?
- d. What about the noetic effects of sin? The mind of unregenerate humanity is not presented in Scripture as being neutral but as being unable to receive or perceive spiritual truth (Rom 1:18-32; Eph 2:1).
- e. What about the necessary work of the Holy Spirit for regeneration?

## **2. Strategy Two: Presuppositionalism**

**Basis:** Presenting any evidence is a waste of time because the non-believer is

- Unregenerate;
- doesn't share your presuppositions.

Therefore, proponents of presuppositionalism suggest that the whole enterprise of apologetics is misguided. Instead, preach the Gospel to them and pray for them!

In presuppositional approach, apologetics is the presentation of the Christian worldview as the only coherent, true expression of reality and based on the facts that Christian faith is self-authenticating, and that God is self-referential, and only He has the authority to validate Himself (Heb 6:13-18).

In other words, the belief-forming function of apologetics differs little from evangelism.

In presuppositional apologetics reason is not a neutral tool applied impartially by unbelievers; rather, humanity is fallen in mind and disposition (Gen 3:1; Rom 1:18-32; 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, what would constitute 'proof' to the believer and to the un-believer may be very different. After regeneration comes understanding ("I believe, therefore I understand").<sup>11</sup>

### **Strategy**

- a. presuppose the truth of Christianity as your starting point;
- b. present the Christian God as both your starting point and ending point;
- c. the Bible gives us the grid through which all experience and truth should be interpreted;
- d. demonstrate that the unbeliever's worldview is unsustainable/inadequate;

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, 'Apologetics', 83-84

- e. only the Christian worldview is adequate to make sense of the evidence/experiences.

### **Strengths**

- a. Demonstrates a very high view of Scripture
- b. Presents the truths of Scripture plainly

### **Weaknesses**

- a. what about where the Bible does appeal to evidence? (John 10:37-38)
- b. the non-believer's presuppositions would also work against the preaching of the Gospel
- c. the noetic effects of sin would also work against hearing and believing the Gospel
- d. couldn't repeated use of evidence also (eventually) remove the non-believer's presuppositions?
- e. can't the Holy Spirit use both the Gospel in partnership with apologetics?

*Evidentialism and Presuppositionalism* are the two extremes of the spectrum. But there are other choices ...

## 3. **Strategy 3: Combining Evidentialism and Presuppositionalism**

### **Strategy**

An informal argument that:

- presents the data;
- gives a hypothesis that best explains this data rather than any alternative hypothesis.

### **Basis**

The case for Christianity is not like a 'proof' from:

- a formal argument (deductive); or
- argument from probability (inductive).

But it is more like the case a lawyer makes before the court or more like a literary critic who argues for his/her particular interpretation.

### **Analysis**

The 'combination approach' affirms that all truth(s) is God's truth and therefore in practice this approach is a collaboration of presenting the Gospel and defending it which in totality is used by the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that:

- most of us are probably presuppositionalists by Tradition;
- so be aware of downplaying the usefulness of presenting evidences. (Notice the appeals to evidence in the Bible).

Sam Chan (Lecturer in Apologetics at Sydney Missionary and Bible College) suspects that 'we find evidences useful and reassuring early in our Christian walk, but as we progress we don't need them as much because our presuppositions are set.'

## 4. **Tim Keller's Contribution**

Tim Keller, writer of 'The Reason for God' describes a 3 point strategy to 'combination apologetics' based on the reality that presenting evidence is not very effective as your hearers don't share your presuppositions.

Keller urges us to know our hearers and find a belief they hold and categorise the strength of their belief (1-10) according to the following strata:

- 1, 2, 3 → believe very strongly
- 4, 5, 6 → kind of believe, but not strongly
- 7, 8, 9, 10 → totally against, don't believe at all

### **Strategy**

Find a belief (in 1 to 6) that overlaps – by God's common grace – with what the Bible teaches then:

1. describe, acknowledge and empathise with their presuppositions;
2. dismantle it (find one presupposition that they want to be true; show how it conflicts with another presupposition they hold);
3. show how they need the Gospel for their presuppositions to be true.

### **Example**

How do you know the Bible is true?

Firstly *Provide Evidence*

- show the historicity of the documents, etc.

Secondly *Address Presuppositions*

- If you want God to be 'loving and personal' (a belief that most people hold/want to hold), you can't tell him what he should say (otherwise love and relationship are not real [dismantle presuppositions]). You need you need to accept his Word on his own terms (conclusion that corresponds to biblical truth). Explain you can't have it both ways ... a God who is loving and personal *and* you getting to choose what bits of him you want to listen to.

## **D. IN SUMMARY – A PROCESS FOR ANSWERING QUESTIONS OF FAITH FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES**

Some basic guidelines for answering the questions from your colleagues.

1. Ask yourself: What is the **origin of the question**? → Why are they asking the question?
  - philosophical enquiry?
  - informational enquiry?
  - existential enquiry?
  - combative enquiry?

The purposes for asking: "why is there evil?" or "other religions?" can be very different!

2. Consider the **presuppositions** behind the question. Are there any defeater-beliefs assumed in the question?
3. **Clarify the question origin and presuppositions**: "What do you mean by that?" and "Why do you say that?" → seek to understand.
  - describe and understand their question
  - it can help to repeat the question in your own words



4. Affirm their right/need to ask the question → seek to **empathise**
  - Find common ground and empathise with their question – “I too wish that ...!”
  - Show the Bible also contains their question!
  - Restate the question in an even stronger and more detailed form
  - Shows that you are not defensive or got something to hide or fear
  
5. Dismantle their presupposition
  - show that it works against their position as well – i.e., their question is a 2-edged sword
  - show that their position is as much a faith-based position as yours (Tim Keller)
  - show that their position is largely a product of their culture (Western) (Tim Keller)
  - take one thing they want to believe, and show how they can’t keep believing this unless they assume the Christian worldview (my take on Keller)
  
6. Discuss any evidence, that is, discuss the informational evidence available.
  - Firstly, outline evidence that is external to the bible accepted by “secular” authorities (historians, scientists, archaeologists)
  - Secondly, outline any relevant “internal evidence” found within the bible. Note this can be less convincing due to the presuppositions held by the questioner.
  
7. Expose the biblical truth but keep in mind that there is no need to force this in the initial conversation because the over-arching context of the conversation is the fact that you have already shared aspects of the Gospel anyway.  
More thorough Biblical analysis can be very helpful to give the questioner in a follow-up email away from the ‘heat’ of the conversation.  
What you can do is show them that what they are looking for is Jesus!
  
8. Be loving and honourable → bring glory to God in the way you answer
  - don’t turn it into an argument
  - don’t belittle the other person
  - remember the importance of pathos, ethos, trust (you may win the debate but lose the hearts of the audience)
  
9. It’s OK not to answer the question:
  - it’s OK to answer with a question (Randy Newman’s thesis in *Questioning Evangelism*)
  - it’s OK to say “I don’t know”

Approaching apologetics in the above manner shows:

- you’re not threatened by the question
- pathos, ethos (as well as logos)

*If this is too detailed and too much to remember, use the following short summary of Sam Chan’s “you can’t have it both ways” approach:*

Show that...

- their original defeater-belief or presupposition is faith-based rather than evidence-based
- there’s a *dissonance or deficiency* in their plausibility structures
- they need the Gospel to complete their world-view

*Homosexuality Example:*

- “homosexuality is right” - presupposition

- “I don’t want to be a Western prejudiced colonialist”

But that’s what you’ve just done – you’ve imposed a Western version of right/wrong.  
So whose version of right/wrong can we trust?

Who’s version of right/wrong can we trust?

**GOD, WHO DIED FOR US.**

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