

Bible Study on Christian Apologetics

First of six studies

The basic principles of Christian apologetics may be summarized as follows:

1. Christian apologetics must be based on God's word.
2. Christian apologetics consists primarily of a presentation of the evidence, or reasons, for recognizing that the Christian gospel message is true.
3. Christian people are admonished to be ready to use apologetics.
4. The goal of Christian apologetics is bringing lost sinners to saving faith in Jesus the Christ. Apologetics is an integral part of evangelism and missionary outreach.
5. The power to save lost souls is found only in the saving gospel message of Jesus the Christ.
6. Saving faith is a new spiritual life created by the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacraments.
7. Saving faith is God's gift to us flowing out of His grace.
8. Apologetics can be either offensive (evidence pointing to the truth of Christianity), or defensive (answering objections to Christianity).
9. Jesus himself made use of both offensive and defensive apologetics.
10. Both kinds of apologetics, offensive and defensive, point to the truthfulness of the gospel message of Jesus the Christ, and does so directly or indirectly.
11. Those who reject the gospel message do so, not because of a lack of proof, but rather because they refuse to believe.
12. Christianity is the only religion that contains significant evidence for its truthfulness.¹

¹ See Isaiah 41:21-29.

In 1521 Martin Luther was called before Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms ("diet" meaning a formal meeting, not a weight-loss plan, and Worms being a city south of Frankfurt). At that meeting Charles demanded that Luther recant all that he had said. What Charles got instead was Luther's defiant response worded as follows:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. [Here I stand.] God help me. Amen.²

With these few words Luther clarified one of the most important principles of Lutheranism—that all doctrine must be based solely on God's word. This standard applies to the field of apologetics as well as to doctrine.

Our Bible studies usually focus on matters of doctrine. A Bible study on apologetics, in contrast, does not concentrate on doctrine, at least not directly, but rather focuses on whether or not the basis of our doctrine, the Bible, is trustworthy. Lutheran apologetics deals with the question of whether or not Scripture, and all of Christianity, is true.

The word "apologetics" comes from the Greek word *ἀπολογία* (*apologia*) which means "to defend a person or thing."³ *Strong's Concordance* defines *apologetics* by saying: "An 'apology' in classical times had nothing to do with saying, 'I'm sorry,' but rather was a reasoned argument (defense) that presented evidence (supplied compelling proof)."⁴ Dr. Rod Rosenblatt defined *apologetics* as follows: "Apologetics is the strategy of setting forth the truthfulness of the Christian faith."⁵

The Apostle Peter admonished us to be ready to make use of apologetics. Said Peter: "Always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).⁶ That is, we should be ready to give our reasons, including our evidence, for being Christians. We derive our English term "apologetics" from this text in I Peter.

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2002/apr12.html>. Some sources do not include the words, "Here I stand." The author has added those words to the *Christianity Today* article.

³ J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Fourth Edition*, T & t Clark, Edinburgh (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Publishing, 1901), 65.

⁴ <http://biblehub.com/greek/627.htm>

⁵ Dr. Rod Rosenblatt, "Beyond Culture Wars," (*Modern Reformation*, Vol. 2, no. 3. May/June 1993), 1. Dr. Rosenblatt (LCMS) is professor of religion at Concordia University, Irvine.

⁶ This passage is usually considered to be the *sedes doctrinae* (basis) for Christian apologetics.

The main application of apologetics is to mission work and evangelism. There was a time when we could verify the gospel message by simply quoting the Bible. That is not always the case today. We can no longer assume that mission prospects see the Bible as being trustworthy, and many churches and church-related institutions actually deny that the Bible is reliable. These bodies accordingly also deny that the Bible is God's word. In a sense we are back to New Testament times. Neither Jesus nor the Apostles assumed that their listeners would necessarily believe what they said just because they said it. Neither did they assume that non-Jewish listeners would see the Old Testament as being authoritative. For these reasons both Jesus and the Apostles presented evidence to demonstrate that what they said was true. There are times when we do well to follow their example.

The Greek word "apologia" has two parts, *apo* meaning from, and *logia*, in I Peter 3:15, meaning "logic."⁷ So Peter asks us to be ready to defend the Christian gospel message and do so from logic, that is, by providing evidence to substantiate the truth of the gospel message.

In New Testament times, this word, *apologia*, was commonly used to denote a speech of a defendant in a court of law. In such a speech a defendant would give reasons and/or evidence in an attempt to disprove the accusations against him. In this text Peter asks us to be ready to give our reasons for the hope that we have. That is, we should be ready to give our reasons, including our evidence, for believing that the gospel message of Jesus Christ is true.

In his second epistle Peter gave us a striking example of how he personally presented such evidence. He said: "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."⁸ That is, said Peter, you can be assured of the truthfulness of everything we have told you because we were there; we were eyewitnesses of all that Jesus said and did. What we have told you is not based on legend or hearsay; we have proclaimed to you what we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears. For this reason you can be assured that everything we have said is true. Peter meant that he and the other apostles were eyewitnesses in the same sense that someone was an eyewitness in a court of law—someone who could give trustworthy testimony because he was there and saw it for himself.

John's gospel provides us with numerous examples of giving the kind of reasons that Peter said we should be ready to supply to those who are willing to hear. John additionally explained why he recorded these reasons and evidence when he said: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

⁷ J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Fourth Edition*, T & t Clark, Edinburgh, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons Publishing, 1901) 381.

⁸ II Peter 1:16

John here said that he was providing us with reasons and evidence for believing that the gospel message is true. Specifically John told us that he recorded many of the *signs* (miracles) that Jesus performed because these miracles served as proof that Jesus is who he said he is—the promised Messiah, God in the flesh and Savior of the world.⁹

John also explained his ultimate reason for including this evidence—namely, that “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The purpose of apologetics is leading lost sinners to a saving faith in Jesus, the Christ. Apologetics is not about winning arguments; it’s all about leading people to faith in Jesus the Messiah.

About this gospel message Paul said: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). Apologetics is effective because it leads lost sinners to the gospel message of Christ, and it’s this gospel message that has the power to create faith.

When Paul said the gospel is the “power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes,” he was speaking of much more than just an intellectual assent on our part as to something being true. By these words Paul meant, as stated by Jesus himself in John 3:3-6, the following:

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

That is, by “everyone who believes,” Paul was referring to those who have received a new spiritual life of faith which is accomplished only by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new spiritual life is God’s gift to us because of His grace and because of His grace alone. Only God himself can create this new spiritual life of faith. Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

There are two forms of apologetics; we can call them *offensive* and *defensive*. Offensive apologetics was illustrated by the Apostle John just above in that John told us he recorded many of the signs Jesus performed, especially the resurrection, in order to convince his readers that Jesus truly is the long-awaited Messiah. Offensive apologetics directly points to the truth of the gospel message. Jesus himself gave us numerous examples of this type of apologetics. Defensive apologetics, in contrast, consists of answering objections to Christianity.

Jesus made use of defensive apologetics in Matthew 12:22-29 which reads as follows:

⁹ The *signs* were evidence with important doctrinal meaning.

²² Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons that this fellow drives out demons.”

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

²⁹ “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

Jesus here refuted (or answered) the objection of the Pharisees to his claim of being the Messiah and did so with four arguments. The first argument is based on the self-evident premise that a “kingdom divided against itself will be ruined.” If Satan actually were the force behind Jesus’ casting out demons, then he would be dividing his kingdom against itself, something he would obviously not do because he would be deliberately weakening his own kingdom.¹⁰

Jesus’ second line of argument is contained in his words: “And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?” The Jewish people apparently had exorcists among them. How successful they were, we cannot say. But Jesus and the Pharisees would have known that the exorcists were acting in the name of Jehovah God, not Satan. So Jesus told the Pharisees, “they will be your judges,” that is, they demonstrate by their example that one doesn’t engage in exorcism in Satan’s name. Jesus used the common knowledge of his listeners as his basis (or premise) for this argument.¹¹

Jesus’ third argument was an analogy. Jesus said that you can’t despoil a strongman’s house without first binding him. (Satan is the strongman.) In this argument it is assumed that you can only tie up the strongman if you are stronger than he is. Since Jesus was successfully casting out evil spirits in league with Satan, that could only be happening if Jesus represented a power greater than Satan.¹²

Jesus then used this conclusion as the basis for his fourth argument, namely, that since Jesus was representing a power greater than Satan, and since the only power greater than Satan is Jehovah God (a self-evident premise), it then follows that, as Jesus stated it, “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The Pharisees had been waiting

¹⁰ This deductive argument takes the valid syllogistic form of: if A, then B. Not B, therefore, not A.

¹¹ This deduction takes the valid syllogistic form: Those who cast out demons do so in the name of Jehovah God. Jesus is casting out demons, therefore, he is doing so in the name of Jehovah God.

¹² This argument takes the same form as the one just above.

for the coming of the kingdom of God. By his reasoning Jesus showed them that this kingdom had not only come, it was staring them in the face.

In summary, Jesus answered a major objection to the gospel message and, by means of his reasoning based on common knowledge, he not only answered the objection and did so convincingly, he also demonstrated that his many and sensational miracles were powerful testimony that he was speaking by God's authority and was, therefore, speaking the truth. His line of arguments began by refuting the objection of the Pharisees, and proceeded to a powerful proclamation that the Messiah had now come and stood in their midst. All Christian apologetics, either directly or indirectly, points to the message that Jesus is the Messiah of God who has come to save lost sinners. Apologetics is an important part of missionary outreach.

This exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees demonstrates that Jesus was a master teacher and logician. It reminds us of the observation by C. S. Lewis who explained that no one should say that Jesus was a great teacher but nothing more. According to Lewis, since Jesus claimed to be God, he could not merely be a great teacher. He was either a demon from hell, a lunatic or the person he claimed to be.¹³ But no lunatic or demon could speak as Jesus spoke. His arguments were clear and highly sophisticated. He debated the best-educated religious leaders of his day and silenced them by what he said. We are left with only one reasonable option, that Jesus actually is the promised Messiah of God.

Why, then, did most of the Pharisees reject him? Jesus, himself, answered that question when he said: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20).

Jesus also said to the Jewish people: "How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks, but you were not willing" (Luke 13:34). People don't reject Christianity for lack of evidence; they do so because they refuse to believe. As Jesus said in Luke 16:31: "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" History demonstrated the truth of Jesus' words as these skeptics refused to believe even when Jesus, Himself, rose from the dead.

We also, should be ready to answer the objections that people have to the gospel message. As our study proceeds, we will consider three common objections. They are (a) Darwinian evolution, (b) the accusation that the New Testament documents were written by persons other than the apostles and are, therefore, unreliable, and (c) the problem of evil. We will also consider some of the wealth of positive evidence which points to the truth of the Christian message, and we will take note of the reality that Christianity is the only religion that offers significant evidence to verify its truthfulness.¹⁴

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 55,56.

¹⁴ See Isaiah 41:21-29.

In closing, we recognize that the principles we have here considered present us with a bit of a paradox which may be stated as follows: Since being a Christian is totally a matter of faith in Jesus the Christ and is entirely the result of God's grace operating through the Word and Sacraments, how, then, can evidence have anything to do with it? In answer, we can readily see that the evidence for the truth of Christianity is part of the Word's testimony to the gospel of Christ. That is, the resurrection of our Lord, His many miracles, the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, and the establishment of eyewitness accounts are all part and parcel of the Word's testimony to the saving gospel message. The doctrine of God's declaration that we are forgiven and are, therefore, righteous because of what Christ has done for us—and the evidence for its truth—are intertwined.¹⁵

Defensive apologetics is a bit different. It is useful for removing barriers to the Christian faith. By itself, defensive apologetics gets us nowhere. We use it to create openings for the successful proclamation of Jesus the Savior of the world. The power of God to save sinners is in the gospel and only in the gospel. It's sort of like a football game—we sometimes need to play defense in order to get the ball back and move it in the right direction. Our goal, always, is effectively presenting the saving message of Jesus the Christ to all who are lost. We use defensive apologetics to make offensive apologetics possible.

Discussion questions:

1. Christian apologetics focuses on the evidence for the truth of Christianity, What evidence do other religions offer? What evidence does Islam, for example, offer for its truthfulness?
2. In his debate with Bill Nye, Ken Ham responded to several objections to Creationism by quoting Scripture. Is this the only proper way to answer objections to the Biblical position? Does the example above of Jesus' debate with the Pharisees shed any light on this question? Did the apostles also use common knowledge and logic for answering objections to the gospel message? See Acts 2:15 and Acts 26:26.

¹⁵ Christian apologetics acknowledges the "ministerial use of reason," reason based on God's word, but apologetics rejects the "magisterial use of reason," reason that places itself above God's word. Christian apologetics rejects rationalism in all its forms.

