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## THE TASK OF THE CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST

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Apologetics has been defined as “the discipline that deals with a rational defense of the Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> Since Christianity posits a certain knowledge and understanding of God, it is the task of the Christian apologist to demonstrate the grounds of biblical revelation and to establish why placing one’s faith in Christianity is not only *reasonable* but also existentially *vital*.

Christians have a biblical mandate to engage in apologetics. Peter said, “Always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15; NASB). The word translated here as “make a defense” is the Greek, *apologia*. The apologist *par excellence* from biblical times was the apostle Paul himself. The Bible tells us that Paul “reasoned” with unbelievers in order to explain the truths of Christianity to them. Paul used terms and arguments his contemporary audience could understand, and he provided “reasoned” responses to their objections (e.g., Acts 17:17). Paul instructed others to carry on the apologetic task, saying that we must “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:5).<sup>2</sup>

One need not possess great intellectual gifts such as Paul’s to engage in apologetics. Christians rather should make use of the particular gifts God has given them while providing answers “for the hope that is in [them].” The goal of apologetics is not to win arguments for the sake of winning arguments or to engage in some kind of intellectual one-upmanship. It is, instead, to offer to unbelievers — with “gentleness and respect” — that which helps them see the light of Christ more clearly. The apologist is charged with removing obstacles, especially intellectual ones, which hinder a faith commitment to Christ. We must recognize, however, that it is ultimately the work of God through grace alone that results in one’s salvation. Paul asserted this truth: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) once wrote that “it is the conduct of God, who disposes all things kindly, to put religion into the mind by reason, and into the heart by grace.”<sup>3</sup> Along with Pascal, it has been the firm conviction of apologists throughout the centuries that arguments do not, in and of themselves, convert; rather, true Christian conversion is rightfully attributed to the work of God in grace.

The question that naturally arises, then, is: If ultimately the gift of salvation is solely dependent on God, why have apologetics? What are the proper *goals* of the apologist? From a biblical standpoint, it appears there are at least three. We will explore these goals and how they fit in with the soteriological (saving) work of the Holy Spirit.

### GOAL NUMBER ONE: TO REMOVE INTELLECTUAL STUMBLING BLOCKS THAT HINDER A FAITH COMMITMENT TO CHRIST

As we’ve seen, Paul taught Christians to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Apologetics is not a biblical suggestion. It is a biblical command! Christians have a divine mandate to share with unbelievers the reason for the hope that lies within them. Christ does not call on the world to make a “blind leap of faith” into a dark abyss of mindless credulity. He rather calls people out of the darkness and into the light of the truth.

Never in Scripture does God command that people believe apart from offering them reasons to do so. Jesus Himself said, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (John 14:11). Peter reminded the unbelievers of his day that Christ was "a man accredited by God to [them] by miracles, wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22); indeed, Peter and Paul argued vigorously for the truth of Jesus' messianic identity by appealing to the meticulous fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in His life, ministry, death, and resurrection (see Acts 3:11–26; 13:27; 26:22; 28:23). We must also be prepared to offer such reasons for belief.

Even so, the question still remains how removing intellectual barriers fits in with the work of the Holy Spirit. There are at least two ways. The first of these involves a consideration of the *elements* of saving faith. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers identified three. They called them the *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. The *notitia*, or "notes," is the *information* contained in the gospel message. This information may be communicated either through reading Scripture itself or by hearing it spoken through a secondary agent. The *assensus* refers to one's *intellectual assent* to that which is presented in the *notitia*. In other words, it is an understanding of, and agreement with, the truthfulness of the gospel message. Finally, there is the *fiducia*. This refers to one's *submission* to the truths contained in the *notitia*. This is more than mere intellectual assent to the truth. It is placing one's trust in it. For example, it's one thing to know and agree intellectually that a chair can support your body. It is quite another thing to put that belief to work by sitting on the chair and thereby demonstrating your trust in its ability to support you. In the same way, the Bible makes it clear that people may come to know, understand, and even believe in the things of God but still withhold their faith and trust in Him in wanton disobedience (see, e.g., James 2:17–20).

When we engage in apologetics, we address ourselves to the first and second of these items, the *notitia* and *assensus*. By stripping away layers of intellectual objection, we leave people without any intellectual excuse before God; yet we acknowledge that only the Holy Spirit can move them to entrust their lives to Christ (1 Cor. 12:3).

The second reason we remove intellectual stumbling blocks is simply that the Holy Spirit often uses these efforts as the very means through which He convicts people of the truth. Many Christians, this writer included, can attest to having heard the words of an apologist at one point in their life and suddenly a "light" turned on inside of them that convinced them of the truth of what they were hearing. This "light" is the work of the Holy Spirit *through* the work of an apologist.

## **GOAL NUMBER TWO: TO SUPPORT AND FURTHER GROUND BELIEVERS IN THEIR FAITH**

This will equip them to witness boldly for Christ and it will also help to protect them from being deceived by worldly philosophies. Paul said, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8). We live in an age that bombards us with a plurality of ideas, many of which are in diametrical opposition to the things of God. Any Christian student on the university campus these days can attest to this. The news and entertainment media also frequently caricature Christians as ignorant and regressive, fomenting doctrines that hinder progress.

In these circumstances, apologetics helps undergird believers in their faith so their witness may be like Paul's in the synagogue where he "spoke boldly...arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). It reminds us, as Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74) put it, that "faith does not destroy reason, but goes beyond it and perfects it."<sup>4</sup> Apologetics demonstrates that we need not fear the intellectual attacks of the committed secularist. The God of Scripture is real, and there is nothing that conventional wisdom can muster to prove Him false. Apologetics strengthens faith and trains Christians in the discernment of error and the proclamation of truth with boldness.

**GOAL NUMBER THREE:  
TO SILENCE THE ATTACKS OF THE UNBELIEVING WORLD**

It seems unbelievers ceaselessly look for opportunities to place reason and science at enmity with faith. Calvin once said part of the apologetic task is to “stop the mouths of the obstreperous.” Peter supported this contention when he said, “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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pet. 3:15–16). By giving reasons for our faith and living an upright life, we “shame” those who “slander” Christians to discredit Christianity.

We must not underemphasize Peter’s apostolic command to keep a clear conscience when engaging the unbelieving world. Apologetics is not merely a call to engage in intellectual argumentation; it is a call to live a life of Christian character. Peter also wrote, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12). As we “contend for the faith” (Jude 3) with evidences and reason, we must strive to live lives that are beyond moral reproach. By doing both, we are more able to silence the attacks of the unbelieving world and live to the glory of God.

Scripture tells us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). We honor this directive when we develop each of these dimensions in our lives and use them to the glory of God. The Christian apologist seeks not to forget the important role that the mind plays in bringing the lost to Christ — especially when it is combined with the strength of a worshipful heart and soul.

- Gannon Murphy

**NOTES**

1. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 37.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 185 (trans. W. F. Trotter, *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)).
4. Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, cited in Paul Horrigan, “Introduction to Philosophy,” <http://www.paulhorrigan.0catch.com>.