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WHY APOLOGETICS HAS A BAD NAME

by Sean McDowell

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I love apologetics! Anyone who has heard me speak, sat in my class, read any of my books, or spent more than twenty minutes with me knows that I believe deeply in the importance of defending the Christian faith. And as a reader of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, I assume you do, too. Pastor and author Timothy Keller says one of the big issues facing the church today is the need for a renewal of apologetics. Keller says apologetics is important for two reasons.¹

First, Christians in the West will soon be facing missionaries from around the world. While loving communities are important, he says that we also need to be prepared to converse thoughtfully with people of differing worldviews.

Second, there is a vacuum in Western secular thought. The enlightenment faith in science and progress has ended, and according to Keller, postmodernism is seen as a dead end, too. This is why Keller concludes, "There is a real opening, apologetically, in reaching out to thoughtful non-Christians, especially the younger, socially conscious ones."

And yet Keller points out something that I have been thinking about for some time, namely that there is a lot of resistance right now among younger evangelical leaders toward apologetics. Why do so many people continue to resist and criticize it? I haven't seen any solid biblical reasons for rejecting apologetics. After all, Jesus was an apologist (John 5:31–47), Paul clearly used apologetics (Acts 17), Peter encouraged people to be able to defend their views (1 Pet. 3:15), and early church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Ignatius regularly used apologetics. Concern must lie elsewhere. My experience tells me that the problem is not with apologetics per se, but with either apologists—the people who practice apologetics—or with a misunderstanding about the task of apologetics.

HOW APOLOGISTS GIVE APOLOGETICS A BAD NAME

The following are some humble thoughts from my research and experience as to why apologetics has a bad name and how we can correct it. The reasons are separated into two categories: this first grouping deals with the behavior of *apologists* and the one that follows addresses people's *understanding* of Christianity and culture. Some of these objections are legitimate while others are illegitimate, yet both need to be addressed to bring apologetics into the church today effectively.

Apologists Often Overstate Their Case

There is a huge temptation to overstate the evidence for the Bible, Intelligent Design, the resurrection of Jesus, or any other apologetic issue. I have succumbed to this myself. In our eagerness to convince nonbelievers, or our desire to strengthen fellow Christians, we can all fall prey to the temptation to state things more certainly than they may be. In 2009 my father and I wrote a book on the resurrection called *Evidence for the Resurrection*. One of the editors wanted to use the tagline "overwhelming evidence" in the subtitle. But I disagreed. Can the evidence for any event two thousand years ago really be *overwhelming*? In our information age, people have access to counterarguments and varying perspectives at the tip of their fingers. We also live in a skeptical age where people who say things with dogmatism are often considered suspect. This does not mean the evidence for Christianity is not compelling. It is. But there are smart, thoughtful people that disagree. And we must acknowledge this, or we'll set up people—especially young people—for failure.

Apologists Often Do Not Speak with Gentleness, Love, and Respect

Recently I had a public debate on the question of God and morality.² As part of my preparation, I watched many debates on the subject. Although I won't mention any names, there were a handful of Christian debaters that honestly made me cringe at how they treated their opponents. One debater (the head of a well-known apologetics ministry that will remain anonymous) demeaned and personally attacked his opponent, a former Christian. I showed the video to my wife and she too was appalled at his antics and behavior. But it's not just public figures that act this way. We probably all have an example of some overly eager apologist who was unnecessarily argumentative rather than loving. If this is you, *please stop*, because you are giving Christianity and apologetics an unnecessarily bad name. I often tell my students that if they can't speak the truth in love, then don't even bother to speak truth.

Apologists Often Are Not Emotionally Healthy

Youth Specialties president Mark Matlock wrote a compelling essay about apologetics and emotional development.³ In it, he argued that apologetics often attracts people who have been emotionally hurt, and in turn, who use apologetics to hurt other people. He's

absolutely right. As the saying famously goes, “Hurt people hurt people.” There is power in knowledge. And many people seek power by gaining more information so they can control and even humiliate other people. If you are an apologist, I encourage you to ask yourself some deep questions: Why (honestly) are you an apologist? Is your heart genuinely broken for non-Christians? Do you pray for humility and guidance in your research and conversations with both Christians and non-Christians? I hope so.

Apologetics Often Is Done in a Cold, Mechanical, and Rationalistic Manner

Many of us think of apologetics as the impersonal deliverance of facts meant to convince people rationally that Christianity is true—as if people are like the alien “Vulcans” of Star Trek fame that live solely by reason! Apologetics is often void of emotion, passion, and good, old-fashioned storytelling. Apologetics is often seen as a narrow discipline for lawyers and doctors. But this is not apologetics. It does (or should) engage the mind but through the heart, imagination, and emotions. C. S. Lewis beautifully modeled this approach with his use of fiction. Insofar as apologetics is viewed as simply rationalistic, it will fail to captivate people.

Apologetics Often Are Intellectually Elitist

Let me ask you a question. In your recent apologetics or evangelistic encounters, how many times have you unnecessarily dropped words like, *weltanschauung*, *ontological*, or *cosmological*? I’m not saying these words aren’t important. Of course they are. Precision and clarity are hugely important, especially for apologists and philosophers. But *why* do you use such words? Is it to make yourself sound smart and sophisticated? Or is it truly to help others out? My father often told me to remember K-I-S-S, which stands for “Keep It Simple, Stupid.” Sometimes the “big” words we use in apologetics circles can turn others off and detract from our effectiveness. In fact, many people in the church don’t even know what “apologetics” means! While I am all for using precise words to communicate truths clearly, let’s try to focus on communicating effectively with those around us rather than impressing them with our knowledge.

HOW PEOPLE’S UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE GIVES APOLOGETICS A BAD NAME

These final two objections are not about *apologists* but related to how people in our culture tend to think about Christianity and culture. Nevertheless, these two misunderstandings are prevalent reasons why apologetics is often put down.

Apologetics Is about the Mind, but Faith Is Considered about the Heart

One of the most common objections I get when teaching apologetics to Christians is that evidence for God minimizes the necessity of faith. In other words, the more reasons we have for Christianity, the less room there is for faith. Many Christians view faith as either believing something *without* evidence or believing something that goes *against* the evidence. The New Atheists have also taken this route, criticizing Christianity as blind, irrational, and stupid. If faith really is opposed to reason, as many Christians and non-Christians think, then apologetics is quite obviously unnecessary. Why would we reason about something that is solely a matter of the heart? The problem is that this is *not* the biblical view. Faith is best understood as trusting in God because He has shown Himself to be reliable and trustworthy.⁴ While many religions downplay the importance of reason, Christianity elevates it. Jesus never called His followers to exercise blind faith. He said to love God with your heart, soul, and *mind*.⁵ In my experience, teaching the biblical dynamic between faith and reason is a helpful way to minimize unwarranted dismissal of apologetics.

Apologetics Is Considered Irrelevant in Our Postmodern Culture

In his book *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Tony Jones begins by sharing an evangelistic encounter that changed his world. This encounter involved him sharing C. S. Lewis's trilemma argument for the Lordship of Jesus with a nonbeliever. The girl responded, "Okay, for you he's Lord of all creation for everyone." In other words, Jesus may be *his* truth, but He is not the universal *truth*. Jones was left speechless. He concluded that Western culture had undergone an entire epistemological shift from modernism to postmodernism. According to Jones and many others, we have entered a postmodern period in which apologetics is no longer relevant. What we need to do is share our narrative and invite people into it.

Lee Strobel encountered this attitude when he first wrote *The Case for Christ*. One of the scholars he interviewed told him it was a great idea, but that no one would buy his book. Why not? According to the scholar, we are in a postmodern culture where people no longer care about the historical evidence for Jesus. Ironically, though, the largest group of people who have contacted Strobel and shared that his book led them to Christ has been sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, the age group that should be most postmodern.⁶

William Lane Craig says the idea that we live in a postmodern culture is misguided. In his cover story for *Christianity Today*, he said, "This sort of thinking is guilty of a disastrous misdiagnosis of contemporary culture. The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of *religion* and *ethics*. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is a matter of personal taste. We live in a culture that remains deeply

modernist.”⁷ And yet the belief that we live in a postmodern culture is a significant reason why many hold that apologetics is offensive and ineffective.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

These are a few of the reasons why apologetics has a bad name. I’m sure there are many more. Our best response to the objections that have to do with the nature of apologetics today is to educate the church. We should be teaching in our churches, youth groups, Christian schools, and families about the biblical understanding of faith and how to do apologetics in our so-called “postmodern” culture.

But our response to the objections that reflect on us personally is more difficult. We need to look honestly within and ask ourselves some tough questions: *Do I overstate my case? Do I speak with gentleness and love? Am I emotionally healthy? Am I overly rational in my apologetics? Do I use sophisticated words when simple ones will do?*

Apologetics is desperately needed today. For the sake of the next generation, and an unbelieving culture, let’s do apologetics with humility and love. Imagine the impact if the church really took apologetics to heart. I get goose bumps just thinking about it.

Sean McDowell graduated summa cum laude from Talbot Theological Seminary with a double master’s degree in philosophy and theology. He teaches Bible at Capistrano Valley Christian Schools, is a nationally recognized speaker, and has authored many articles and books, including the coauthored *Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by the New Atheists* (Kregel, 2010).

NOTES

- 1 Timothy Keller, “Five Big Issues Facing the Western Church,” February 11, 2010: http://redeemercitytocity.com/blog/view.jsp?Blog_param=125.
- 2 You can watch the debate here: <http://vimeo.com/16483272>.
- 3 See Mark Matlock, “Apologetics and Emotional Development: Understanding Our Ways of Knowing and Finding Meaning,” in *Apologetics for a New Generation*, ed. Sean McDowell (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).
- 4 See Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, *Is God Just a Human Invention?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), chap. 1.
- 5 Matthew 22:37.
- 6 Strobel shared this with me personally when I interviewed him for my book *Apologetics for a New Generation* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).
- 7 William Lane Craig, “God Is Not Dead Yet,” *Christianity Today* (posted 07/03/2008). Available online at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html?start=5>.