

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## Why Do We Need Apologists?

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*Note: This article kicks off reformation21's latest series, "Christian Apologetics." Join us as William Boekestein outlines how we can prepare to make a defense for the hope that is in us.*

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From the earliest days, Christians needed to defend not worshipping like their neighbors. The apostle Paul and later Christian teachers called *apologists* (e.g., Justin Martyr, Tertullian) argued that it was right to believe the gospel despite objections from Jewish and heathen philosophers. Many others after them have carried on their tradition. Who will defend and advance the Christian faith today when truth itself is ridiculed?

God calls all of his people to practice the discipline of apologetics. But hurdles threaten to keep us from fulfilling our calling. We might feel that apologetics is best left to the experts. But Peter is clear that every Christian must be "prepared to make a defense" of the faith ([1 Peter 3:15](#)). We might wonder if apologetics is appropriate. Some Christians think confrontation and contradiction are unloving. Many of us fear offending others. But from God's perspective it is truly unloving to allow people to remain confused about the most important truths. More seriously, we might lack confidence in the gospel. You can't defend what you don't believe. Thankfully, apologetics doesn't just benefit outsiders; it also equips God's people to know the answers others need.

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# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

This series of articles aims to help Christians become better equipped to know and defend the faith. So as an introduction, let's start with a few questions: what is apologetics, what is its value, and what limits does it have?

## Apologetics Is God's Plan for Defending Truth

"Apologetics" comes from the fairly common, similar-sounding New Testament word, *apologia*. Here are some examples of the word at work. Paul believed he was "put here for the defense (*apologia*) of the gospel" ([Phil. 1:16](#)). After he was arrested in the temple a mob nearly killed him over serious accusations about his faith. When allowed by the Roman soldiers to address the crowd here's how Paul started: "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense (*apologia*) that I now make before you" ([Acts 22:1](#)). His speech explained how God had converted him and sent him with a message of good news. The charges against his faith were unfounded.

But apologetics isn't just for apostles. The Philippians shared with Paul God's grace "in the defense (*apologia*) and confirmation of the gospel" ([Phil. 1:7](#)). Philippian Christians were apologists. In fact, so are all believers. "But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense (*apologia*) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" ([1 Peter 3:15](#)). Believers should be hopeful people. Their hope should be evident. And they should answer those who ask the reason for their hope. Doing so is apologetics. People asking about our hope sounds nice. But Peter assumes that Christians will be put in a defensive position, facing "reviling" (9, 16) and suffering (14, 16). The basic objection apologetics answers is that the Christian hope and its basic message is groundless.

But apologetics is not simply a defensive discipline. Instead, the Christian apologist begins at the point of the concern raised, or accusation made, and builds a positive case for the faith. B.B Warfield calls it a "constructive science." The task of apologetics is to "investigate, explicate, and establish the grounds on which" Christian theology rests.<sup>1</sup> A successful apologetic distinguishes assertions from reality; it shows hopeful belief to be reasonable. So, for example, if someone claims that the doctrine of hell is unjust the apologist answers the objection. But he also promotes the necessity of hell as an answer to injustices not redressed in this age. So, what began as an accusation can result in an exclamation: "Surely there is a God who judges on earth" ([Ps. 58:11](#)).

## Apologetics Has Value for Believers and Unbelievers

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), s.v. "Apologetics," by Benjamin B. Warfield.

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Apologetics assures believers that “Christianity is not just intellectually defensible but also intellectually *satisfying* at the deepest of levels.”<sup>2</sup> And this is essential. If the believer must “be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him, it is impossible for him to be a believer without a reason for the faith that is in him; and it is the task of apologetics to bring this reason clearly out in his consciousness, and to make its validity plain.”<sup>3</sup> Faith cannot be a wish or a desire. Faith is “conviction passing into confidence; ... all forms of convictions must rest on evidence as their ground. ... We believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in him, not even though it be irrational.”<sup>4</sup> As others have recognized, “Christianity is a divine revelation, but it is at the same time pure reason; it is the true philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Christianity is “absolute ‘rationalism.’”<sup>6</sup> Paul makes this point in an apologetic setting: “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” ([Acts 26:8](#)). In fact, Jesus’ resurrection is the surest ground for a hopeful faith in the Triune God ([1 Cor. 15:3–4](#)). Apologetics helps believers realize that there is no part of the Bible that should make us “hide from [our] opponents in embarrassed silence.”<sup>7</sup>

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Apologetics can also help unbelievers. It is truly loving for an apologist to knock down lies that have propped up disbelief, thus eroding confidence in rejecting God. Paul says, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)). Church elders model how to “rebuke those who contradict” sound doctrine ([Titus 1:9](#)). And God can use apologetics to give faith to doubters. After Paul defended the resurrection’s credibility “speaking true and rational words” he urged King Agrippa to join him in trusting the God of the prophets (Acts 26). Faith can come by hearing the word of God defended ([Rom. 10:17](#)). “The action of the Holy Spirit in giving faith is not apart from the evidence, but along with evidence; and in the first instance consists in preparing the soul for the reception of the evidence.”<sup>8</sup>

Objections to Christianity and doubts of believers and unbelievers need to be heard and taken seriously. And Christianity can withstand them. It has faced unparalleled scrutiny for 2,000 years and has not failed.

## Apologetics Cannot Make People Believe

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Kruger, *Surviving Religion 101: Letters to a Christian Student on Keeping the Faith in College* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Warfield, “Apologetics.”

<sup>4</sup> Warfield, “Apologetics.”

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 508.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1976), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 515.

<sup>8</sup> Warfield, “Apologetics.”

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Some apologetic methods assume that, given enough clearly presented facts about the faith, people will be able to make a decision for Christ. But “Mere reasoning cannot make a Christian; ...not because faith is not the result of evidence, but because a dead soul cannot respond to evidence.”<sup>9</sup> “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” ([1 Cor. 2:14](#)). Even very smart people will misread the signs for God if their hearts are not right with him. In fact, often the smarter the unbelieving person, the more refined and rigorous their unbelief.

For this reason, Paul was careful not to depend on apologetic skill. He preached the gospel “not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that ... faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” ([1 Cor. 2:5](#)). If we think we can convince people to believe by presenting enough good facts about God we miss that “facts are collected, sifted, and interpreted in light of a person’s worldview ... and that worldview is not so much determined by the facts as it is controlling of what a person accepts as a fact in the first place.”<sup>10</sup> Truth is not subjective. But personal knowledge is. Critics of Christianity are not neutral. Because of humanity’s fall into sin people are powerfully wired to disbelieve God. No amount of apologetic skill will change that. Many who sat under Jesus’ preaching, witnessed his miracles, and heard first-hand reports of his resurrection disbelieved. When the word became flesh, Jesus’ neighbors — even his own brothers — did not recognize his divinity ([John 7:5](#)).<sup>11</sup> Because of the darkness in us ([Matt. 6:23](#)) the light of nature isn’t bright enough to convert us.<sup>12</sup>

At Paul’s conversion “something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight” ([Acts 9:18](#)). Something like this must happen for anyone to truly know God; to see “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” the veil must be removed from our hearts ([2 Cor. 3:12–18](#)).

In apologetics we aren’t so much presenting a religion as introducing the God who made heaven and earth. We aren’t asking anyone to stand as judges over revelation — whether proofs of God or a defense of the resurrection; we present revelation as facts, but facts that have great obligations and can bring great joy. And then we depend on God to do his work of converting and strengthening.

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<sup>9</sup> Warfield, “Apologetics.”

<sup>10</sup> Kruger, *Surviving Religion* 101, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 338.

<sup>12</sup> Canons of Dort 3/4.4.

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