

# Christian Apologetics Foundations - Unit 316



## Week 1 – What is Apologetics?

## Introduction:

John Dickson ask the question: “Would we be better off without religion?” (2011 Smith Lecture 45 minutes).

## What is Apologetics?

The word apologetics has its origin in the Greek words *apologia* (noun) and *apologeomai* (verb).

These words did not have a Christian origin. Their source was the Greek courts where an accused person was given an opportunity to refute the charges brought against him or her.

In New Testament times the noun *apologia* meant a statement or speech in reply or in defence. Thus in Acts 22:1, where Paul is about to answer various charges brought against him, he starts his reply with the words:

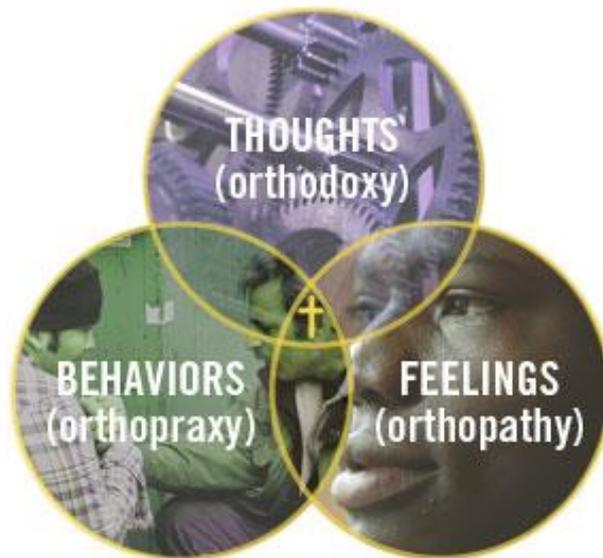
- Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defence (Gk=*apologia*).

Pinnock writes succinctly that:

An apologist is one who is prepared to defend the (Christian) message against criticism and distortion, and to give evidences of its credibility.<sup>1</sup>

## Watching the three ortho's

Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always **be ready to explain it.**<sup>16</sup> But do this in a **gentle and respectful** way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they **see what a good life you live** because you belong to Christ. (1 Peter 3:15-17)



<sup>1</sup> C H Pinnock, “Apologetics” in *New Dictionary of Theology* ed. D. F. Wright, S. B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove Il.: InterVarsity, 1988), 36

To be true to the Christian faith we need to ensure that what is defending represents;

- Orthodoxy – right belief, be prepared to explain
- Orthopraxy – right conduct (Behaviour), live a good life
- Orthopathy... right feeling (motivation, heart, pathos). Gentle and respectful<sup>2</sup>

Truth is found in the intersection of these 3 orthos... Apologists have usually been compromised if they viewed any of the three as dispensable.

## Why is apologetics necessary?

One could argue that apologetics serves two main functions:

- It bolsters the faith of the believing community
- It is an aid in the task of evangelism

If we are to be relevant apologists we must make sure we meet at least two criteria:

- We must answer the questions of our time and context.
- We must also be sure that it is genuine Christian faith we are defending.

## The relationship between apologetics and evangelism

While some people see apologetics as being a sub section of evangelism, it is probably better to see them as two different though related fields.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- Evangelism involves the *communication* of the message of Jesus Christ; apologetics involves the *clarification* of the Christian position on which the Gospel rests. Put slightly differently, in evangelism we are **making the Christian message clear**, while in apologetics we are **dealing with objections** which may be raised against that message.
- In evangelism the content of the message tends to revolve around the gospel of Jesus. The range in apologetics is broader.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks To Dr. Brian Harris of Vose Seminary for these thoughts

- Evangelism recognizes that head understanding alone is not enough, and also aims for the heart. Apologetics helps to clear away the obstacles to faith created in the mind. It is the rational defense of the Christian faith.
- There is a certain timelessness about evangelism. By contrast, the content of apologetics changes because the questions and contexts within which objections arise, changes. For example the change in a basic belief in God to a stronger atheism.
- Evangelism is focused outside the community of faith but apologetics may be focus outside and inside.

## Faith and Reason in Apologetics

Hebrews 11:6 states:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The role of the apologist is to clear away doubts so that the non-believer is in a position to take reasonable steps of faith.

The apologist has a role in demonstrating the credibility of the faith so that the ground is prepared whereby a person can realistically place their trust in God without having the obstacle of fair questions being unanswered.

## Elements of Apologetics

When thinking about the reasoning an apologist is going to use the following should be taken into account;

### ***Context:***

Without an awareness of context, one inevitably starts to answer questions no one is asking.

There are various components which go towards making up the context. These include:

### ***Culture:***

In some cultures e.g. belief in God is automatically assumed (this is true of most of the cultures of Africa). To try to prove the existence of God is irrelevant if everyone already knows God exists. The burning question is *which* God to believe in.

*Sub-culture:*

A knowledge of the broader culture needs to be supplemented by a knowledge of the sub-culture (e.g. is it a youth sub culture; a gang; a group of elderly war veterans etc.)

*Time:*

Though one may be speaking to a group in 2014, if the group is made up of 80 year olds, much of their thinking will have been shaped by the worldview of the 1930's and 40's.

*Place:*

For example, rural communities face very different questions to urban ones.

*Philosophical concerns:*

While most people would be hard pressed to name even one prominent philosopher, and would be confused by a discussion of the philosophical tone of our time, all people are shaped in their understanding of the world by the philosophical undercurrents of the day.

The good apologist will always be in touch with the tenor of the times.

One should also try to understand the political tone of the day.

Culture and context are at all times 'bread and butter' issues for the apologist.

*The world as we experience it*

If what the apologist says does not tally with the world as experienced by the listeners, s/he speaks in vain! This does not mean that the arguments are not sound or intellectually satisfying. It simply means that if what is said does not intersect with the world of the listeners, it will be dismissed as being of no consequence.

**For most people, the strongest apologetic for the Christian faith is when 'life works' for those who follow its teaching.**

**Possible Further Reading:**

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Boyd, Gregory A. *Letters from a Sceptic* Colorado Springs, Colorado: Victor Books, 1997

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Strobel, Lee *The Case for Christ* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998

Strobel, Lee *The Case the Real Jesus* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2007

Strobel, Lee *The Case for Faith* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000