

Thoughts on the Basis and Basics of Christian Apologetics

Daniel Otto Jack Petersen

Part 1: The Atmosphere in which Christian Apologetics Thrives

Preface

I hasten to begin this article by making clear that I am personally not an expert of *any kind*, never mind in 'Christian Apologetics'. However, I hope to demonstrate that though no human testimony is *needed* by the self-existent and self-authenticating God, nevertheless each believer has a God-given assignment to reasonably defend his or her faith, a holy privilege and commission to 'take his or her case for Christianity to the world' as Scott Key says in his 'Spiritual Disciplines' article¹. That fact is my only 'excuse' for writing on this subject at all. Of course, apologetics is a great interest and pleasure to me as well, but above all I feel a responsibility to encourage and equip fellow believers in understanding our awful and beautiful responsibilities in Christ, as prescribed by His Word: in this particular case, a ready defence for our faith.

Clearing the rubble off the site

I am afraid this will be an article full of preliminaries. As Nehemiah and the returned exiles found at the scene of Judah's destroyed city walls in the 5th century B.C., there is much rubble to clear off the site before the real work can begin. Probably the foundation scripture reference for the practice of Christian Apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15, perhaps a well-known verse. I quote it below in its context. This context is important for understanding the 'atmosphere' in which apologetics is meant to thrive. Please read and consider it carefully. If I am successful in rousing you to the apologetic task at all, then of course you will want to read Peter's entire encouraging and challenging epistle for the full framework:

1 Peter 3:8-18

8 Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For

"He who would love life
And see good days,
Let him refrain his tongue from evil,
And his lips from speaking deceit.
11 Let him turn away from evil and do good;
Let him seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
And His ears are open to their prayers;
But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil."

13 And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled."

15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear: 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. 17 For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit. (NKJV)

Defending the centre

I will mostly leave contemplation of the above passage and its implications to the reader, but a few observations are in order. In the next article we will see that though Christian Apologetics is more than intellectual, it is by no means *less* than intellectual. We are told here (as elsewhere in scripture) that God's purpose for the intellects of the elect is *unity*—'all of you be of one mind'ⁱⁱ. Of course, it is always important to remind ourselves that 'unity' by definition assumes and requires 'diversity'. It is our *focal point* that must be the 'same'. The individual believer's unique thought processes centre in the person of Jesus Christ. Each of us is 'looking unto Jesus' in faith (Hebrews 12:2). Therefore, by the 'Spirit of Christ' dwelling in us (Romans 8:9, 1 Peter 1:11) we may confidently say in unison, 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16). His is the 'one mind' we are to 'be of'.

Now, this is important because, sadly, all too often the defence of the Christian faith before the non-believing world degenerates into the travesty of believer 'litigating' against believer about their differences instead of building the case for what they have in common! I call this 'degeneration' because it is obviously not the attractive and effective picture Peter painted when he wrote the important foundational words of our apologetic commission. So, rather, let us avoid this stifling and claustrophobic atmosphere of disharmony and instead let us breathe the fresh air of Peter's imperatives—compassion, love, tender-heartedness, courtesy, blessing, goodness, peace, righteousness, prayer. Augustine's maxim is ever practical and practicable in these matters: 'Unity in the essentials, liberty in the non-essentials, and charity in all.'

Thinking again of Nehemiah's circumstance, we find that as the people rebuilt the walls in the face of potential threat from military enemies, their plan was to rally to one another at whatever location might come under attack and concentrate their otherwise scattered forces to repel the assault. It is only by this kind of strategic and harmonious defence that we will 'build' our collective case for Christ. C. S. Lewis did this very thing when he joined the apologetic community (which for him, rightly, was when he joined the Church): 'Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times... That part of the line where I thought I could serve best was also the part that seemed to be thinnest. And to it I naturally went.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Devoted to an awful thing

Note, furthermore, that this command to be ready to reasonably defend our hope is set in the context of a whole letter on suffering righteously as Christians, of

being submissive to authorities outside the church and to one another within the family of God, and of walking in holy fear before our God. The command to defend Christianity verbally is surrounded by exhortations to defend Christianity by our good conduct, sometimes even ‘without a word’ (3:1). Our actions must commend our words.

By an arresting phrase—‘sanctify the Lord God in your hearts’—Peter shows us the *personal* prerequisite of so defending the faith in word and deed. J. B. Phillips translates the phrase as ‘simply concentrate on being completely devoted to Christ in your hearts.’ But ‘sanctify’ comes from a root meaning ‘an awful thing’, so for fuller meaning add to this ‘complete devotion’ a sense of awe before the indwelling Lord’s majesty, worshipping His enthronement in our lives. Prior to apologetics, indeed, as the fountain from which apologetics springs, the Christian is to cultivate holy dread and worshipful wonder of God as King at the core of his or her personality and being. If we are not inwardly in awe of the sovereign Creator and demonstrably loyal to His Lordship, then we are not likely to convince anyone else He exists or has spoken and acted in history.

The beauty of human relationships

Peter earlier in the letter commands us, ‘conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear’ (1:17). If holy heart-reverence for God is the cornerstone of our apologetics, then the capstone will be our ability to reasonably defend our hope ‘with meekness and fear’. We will be, as the early church was, intellectually and morally powerful, able to be at one and the same time bold and gentle, just as Jesus Christ was. Without compromising our belief or practice, we will demonstrate profound respect toward our fellow human beings, each one created in the image of God.

Francis Schaeffer said ‘the beauty of human relationships’ is a *reality* Christians must practice, that there should be ‘orthodoxy of community’ as well as orthodoxy of doctrine. He urged this to happen both within the church and before the eyes of the watching world:

‘to *true* Bible-believing Christians across all the lines, in all the camps, I emphasise: If we do not show beauty in the way we treat each other, then in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of our own children, we are destroying the truth we proclaim... Men should see in the church a bold alternative to the way modern men treat people as animals and machines. There should be something so different that they will listen, something so different it will commend the gospel to them.’^{iv}

Truth and beauty are inseparable, as Schaeffer emphasised. So both our heavenly family in Christ and our human family in Adam must be treated with a breathtaking dignity and respect as image-bearers of God. This reality must characterise our apologetics, otherwise every evidence we present, no matter how creditable in itself, will be coloured by an ugliness in the presentation that is hard to ignore, and indeed ought not to be ignored, but distrusted. However, if this beautiful reality of human relationships is practiced with integrity, then we may have, as verse 16 says, a ‘good conscience’.

If you are breathing then you are ready

If this brief outline of the atmosphere conducive to the flourishing of Christian Apologetics is granted and breathed; if we as the ‘orthodox community’ are willing to build *together* the case for our truth-claims with an air that is courteous, respectful, compassionate, peaceful; if our mouths are loath to revile, but quick to bless; if we are a worshipping community of individual believers thinking upon the same Lord with hearts and minds full of awe and wonder; then we are at last ready to move on to that central phrase so important to our task—‘always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you’. To this we will proceed in the next article.

ⁱ Scott, perhaps you could put a link to your article here in the endnote? If not, just delete this endnote.

ⁱⁱ The Greek for ‘one mind’ here is the compound word *homophron*—‘together-understanding’, ‘co-cognition’. Christians, though very free to differ, are not a ‘think and let think’ community in the sense of having no corporate accountability or sensitivity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis, C. S. (1952), *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1996 Touchstone Edition, New York, NY, p. 6. I do not intend here to encourage an oversimplified ‘ecumenicalism’. Part of an intellectually rich and ‘tough-minded’ apologetic is that we defend our distinctives as well as our commonalities. What I *am* promoting is an attitude and an atmosphere of compassion, love, courtesy, and peace, in which intellectual and Biblical integrity and purity can flourish.

^{iv} Schaeffer, Francis (1974), *Two Contents: Two Realities*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, p. 32.