

Apologetics

Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training

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Introduction:

This will be a study on the subject of apologetics. Apologists differ widely on the proper methodology of apologetics. In the course of this study I will give a brief presentation of the five major views of apologetics; the two most prominent being Classical Apologetics and Presuppositional Apologetics. I will give greater weight to the subject of Presuppositional Apologetics which I believe is the best approach to the subject.

The great end of any apologetical position must not be just winning the argument. We must always guard against pride. We must have the overarching motive of leading all men to Christ. Our apologetic must be seen as a tool to ornament our witness.

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Definitions:

By way of definition, apologetics has to do with defending or making a case for the truth of the Christian faith to unbelievers who have questions or who present honest objections regarding God and Christianity. The word apologetics is derived from the Greek word apologia (ἀπολογία), which means “defense.” This is in contrast to polemics which refers to the practice of refuting doctrinal errors within the Christian community. There are three aspects of apologetics:

1. Apologetics as proof – the basis for proving that Christianity is true.
2. Apologetics as defense – answering questions of unbelief.
3. Apologetics as offense – not only does apologetics answer the objections of unbelievers, it openly attacks falsehood.

Danger:

We must approach the subject of our defense of the faith with great fear and trembling. When we do not teach our errors affect only ourselves. When we teach they affect others also. Great care must be exercised in how we defend the faith. James warned: ^{NAS} **James 3:1** – “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.”

We must guard against a quarrelsome or contentious spirit. We are called to defend the Word of God, but to do so in meekness and a spirit of love and gentleness and peace.

A Presentation of the Five Major Views

I. Classical Apologetics

R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Norman Geisler

- A. “The *classical method* is an approach that begins by employing natural theology to establish theism as the correct worldview” (*Five Views*, page 15). Natural theology seeks to prove God’s existence and define His attributes solely from human reason and/or observations from the natural world. Natural theology in its pure form believes that God’s existence can be known apart from any special revelation. Thomas Aquinas was a famous proponent of natural theology. Most reformers rejected the philosophy of natural revelation because of the doctrine of Sola Scriptura—Scripture as the sole source through which a man might obtain a proper view of God, man, justice, etc. and because of the depravity of man which leaves him unable to know God properly apart from Divine revelation.
- B. Classical Apologetics seeks to find a balance between faith and reason
 1. Classical apologetics places a focus on the rational aspect of Christianity without ruling out the necessity of the witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men – a blend of the objective and the subjective.
“We can show that Christian theism is true by presenting arguments for theism and evidences for a specifically Christian theism, which go to show, when coupled with defensive apologetics, that Christian theism is the most plausible worldview a sufficiently informed, normal adult can adopt. The Holy Spirit will then use such arguments and evidence to draw unbelievers to a knowledge of God by removing their sinful resistance to the conclusion of our arguments” (*Five Views*, page 54).
 2. The Classical Apologist draws a distinction between general revelation and natural theology.
General revelation is the fingerprint of the Potter upon the clay whereas natural theology is the human contemplation of God’s general revelation.
- C. After establishing the existence of God, this approach uses historical evidence to prove the deity of Christ, the truth of Scripture, etc.
 1. According to this approach, one has to first establish the existence of God as the frame work through which all other empirical data can be interpreted. In other words, miracles cannot prove God. God proves the miracles. Theistic arguments must precede Christian evidences.
 2. It is called “classical” because it assumes that this method was used by the most prominent apologists of earlier centuries.
- D. Proponents of this view argue that when speaking with unbelievers we should not argue on the basis of standards derived from the Bible.
 1. We must use criteria that the unbeliever will accept. If we demand that they assume God’s existence and the authority of Scripture communication with them will be impossible
 2. They state that to use the existence of God to prove the existence of God is circular reasoning.

- D. One of the weaknesses of the classical method is the failure to stress the Word of God as essential to proving the truth of the Christian faith.
1. Calvin believed that one needed the “spectacles of Scripture” to rightly interpret God’s revelation in nature.
 2. What is it that the Holy Spirit bears witness to apart from Scripture?
 3. What is the standard for measuring the evidence? This method seems to diminish the authority and sufficiency of Scripture

II. Evidential Apologetics

Gary Habermas, Clark Pinnock, Josh McDowell

- A. Evidential Apologetics has much in common with Classical Apologetics with the major difference being the use of historical evidence.
1. They sometimes refer to this as a “one step” approach—i.e., one does not have to prove the existence of God before being able to benefit from the specific teachings of Christianity.
 2. Others hold that historical evidences will only work within the context of a theistic worldview.
- B. Evidential apologists seek to accumulate various historical facts as arguments for the truth of Christianity.
1. This approach holds that miracles do not presuppose the existence of God (as do the classical apologists) but serve as one evidence for God’s existence.
 2. This approach does not presume that evidence, logic, or argument alone is sufficient to drive someone into the kingdom of God but there is enough epistemological common ground to speak meaningfully to an unbeliever.
 3. To some degree, all of the positions are eclectic in their approach drawing from the various other positions. All to some degree use evidence in their argument.
Bernard Ramm: “Many apologists absorb evidences into their apologetic system as some point, and if we understand how and why they do this, we can readily understand the structure of the argument in the evidential school” (*Five Views*, pages 12-13).
 4. This view falls short apart from a biblical worldview.
John Frame: “Without the biblical God there is no reason to suppose that there is a rational, causal order leading to a first cause. So even a proof of God must presuppose him.”

III. Cumulative Apologetics

Paul Feinburg, C.S. Lewis

This approach does not conform to any single pattern of deductive or inductive reasoning.

1. This approach falls into the same general camp as evidentialists
This approach pieces together several types of data into a theory that comprehensively explains the data. Their arguments might include the workings of nature, the reality of religious experience, historical evidence like the resurrection, etc.

2. Their conclusion is that Christianity makes better sense of all of the evidence available than does any other alternative worldview.

IV. Reformed Epistemology Apologetics (a relatively new apologetical system)

Kelly James Clark

This position holds that it is perfectly reasonable for a person to believe many things without evidence

1. Belief in God does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational. Argumentation is not necessary for rational faith.
2. If Calvin is right that people are born with a sense of the divine then people may rightly and rationally come to have a belief in God without the aid of evidence.
3. The lost person is encouraged to place himself in situations where people are typically moved to belief in God, attempting to awaken them to their latent sense of the divine.

V. Presuppositional Apologetics

Augustine, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahnsen, Francis Schaeffer, John Frame

A. We must begin with a presupposition of the existence of God

1. All men have a knowledge of God. "At some level of his consciousness or unconsciousness, that knowledge remains. But in spite of that knowledge, the unbeliever intentionally distorts the truth, exchanging it for a lie (Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16; 2 Cor. 4:4)" (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, page 8).
2. Van Til argues that without God there is no meaning, no truth, no rationality; therefore, God exists. Without God it would not be possible to reason or think.
3. Natural revelation is God's revelation of Himself in everything that He has made and is sufficient to declare the existence of God.
 - a. It reveals the eternal power and nature of God
 - b. Scripture comes alongside natural revelation and serves to clarify and correct our view of God's created world. In this way Scripture takes precedence over natural revelation. As Calvin said we put on the "spectacles of Scripture" to rightly interpret God's revelation in nature.

B. We must presuppose the truth of God's Word. Scripture alone is the framework through which all experience is interpreted and all truth is known

1. In this system of apologetics there is a presupposition of the truth of Christianity and this becomes the starting point for apologetics. Without a presupposition of Christian theism no amount of reasoning makes sense.
 - a. A Christian cannot declare his belief in the existence of God while simultaneously arguing on the basis of a different set of assumptions that God may not exist.

- b. We presuppose that the Bible is true. The unbeliever presupposes that the Bible is not true. We must not argue on the basis of his presupposition.
 - 2. Because of the sinfulness of man and the corresponding blindness, all of the other methods of apologetics fall short.
Calvin: “They who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards” (*Certainty of the Faith*, page 89).
 - 3. Various evidences and arguments can be advanced for the truth of Christianity but it is implied that these can be true only if Christianity is true.
John Frame: “We should present the biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes the argument possible” (*Five Views*, page 19).
 - 4. Sola Scriptura does not require the exclusion of all extrabiblical data. We are always working in the context of our contemporary world. We are constantly making application of the Scriptures to our culture. Sola Scriptura merely requires that the highest authority is Scripture alone.
- C. God always adds a supernatural aspect to our witness
 - 1. Both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are at work. We have the duty of telling sinners to submit to Christ and believe His Word but salvation comes solely as the result of God’s sovereign grace.
 - 2. God has ordained that we present Him and His Word to the lost. This is His method. Scripture is sufficient unto itself, yet the church is the pillar and ground of the truth.
 - 3. The Holy Spirit works in and with the Word of God convincing sinners of the truth that we bring.
 - 4. It is not within our power to convince the lost man of the truth through human argumentation or reason alone.
- D. Although Presuppositional Apologetics presuppose the existence of God and the authority of Scripture it does not irrational
 - 1. It is not a belief without evidence, although it presents God’s Word as sufficient evidence.
Frame: “What Scripture teaches, it teaches credibly. It presents an extraordinary spectacle of many authors of different times, social strata, and literary skills, producing a story which is perfectly unified around the person of Jesus. The facts are presented with remarkable credibility (even the kings of Israel are shown “warts and all”), despite the radical uniqueness of Jesus and his message. Indeed, Scripture even presents a credible reason for its being so credible—its divine authorship as the covenant constitution of the people of God. So, biblical religion alone, of all the religion and philosophies of the world, provides an authoritative answer to the question we most need to ask of God: How can my sins be forgiven? Is its credibility absolutely certain? Ultimately, yes, for it is the Word of God himself and therefore deserves to be presupposed as the highest standard of credibility. How can we be persuaded of that certainty? By the Holy Spirit’s witness to us, reinforcing the credibility inherent in

the text itself (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thes. 1:5)” (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, page 147).

2. What Scripture says is always true
 Scripture says the God exists
 Therefore, God exists
 Such an approach might seem unconvincing. It would be rejected by the unbeliever, but that is because the unbeliever is irrational. The unbeliever ought to believe in the existence of God simply on the basis of the general revelation of Creation.
 Frame: “If our task is simply to put the unbeliever into a position where he ought to believe, then we are best advised to do nothing, for he is in that position already” (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, page 63).
 3. Scripture presents its own reasons to support what it says. We are to believe the Scriptures for Scriptural reasons – Biblical reasons for Biblical truth. We argue for the existence of God based upon the Biblical argument.
 - a. For example, the Bible presents a moral argument – why do all men have a sense of morality. Robbery is not wrong because we dislike it; rather, we dislike it because it’s wrong. Where did this objective understanding come from?
 - b. The Bible presents a cosmological argument –
Psalm 8:3-4 – “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, The moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; ⁴ What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?”
 - c. The Bible presents a rational argument - where did human rationality come from? How is it we are able to comprehend God? How is it that the human mind can make sense of the world? Why would mere chance equip us with eyes and a brain to see what we are doing?
- E. There is a distinctly Christian worldview
1. There are Christian views on history, science, philosophy, business and finance, sociology, ethics, education, the arts, etc. Apologetics must be brought to bear when discussing these things.
 2. The apologist must presuppose the lordship of Christ. He is Lord over every aspect of life. He has the authority and power to command and to expect obedience. The Christian must have a voice in the public arena
 3. The apologist must presuppose the sovereignty of God who has created all things, who has ordained all things and who rules all things. He is the origin of all truth. “When sinners try to gain knowledge without the fear of the Lord, that knowledge is distorted” (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, page 51).
 4. The apologist must presuppose the absolute nature of truth and that the Word of God is infallible.