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Apologetics and the Interpretation of Fact

In this concluding chapter on evidentialist apologetics, we will summarize this model or paradigm for apologetics, illustrate its use in practical apologetic encounters, and then consider its major strengths and weaknesses.

The Evidentialist Model

As explained in chapter 3, we are summarizing each model of apologetic system under two headings (metapologetics and apologetics) and six specific questions under each heading. Here we apply this analysis to the evidentialist model.

METAPOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Metapologetic questions deal with the relation of apologetics to other forms of human knowledge. In chapter 9 we considered the evidentialist approach to answering questions about knowledge in general, theology, philosophy, science, history, and experience. Here we summarize our findings in that chapter.

1. On what basis do we claim that Christianity is the truth?

In broad terms we have distinguished the evidentialist approach from the classical approach in a number of ways. Classical apologetics is characteristically dominated by deductive reasoning and seeks to base its case on a foundation of select, rationally certain truths. Evidentialist apologetics is dominated by inductive, empirical reasoning and seeks to build its case from a mass of factual evidences. The classical approach typically launches its argument in two stages: the first seeks to prove the theistic worldview, while the second, building on the first, seeks to prove the specific, central claims of the Christian faith. The evidentialist approach typically involves one complex process of mounting a case for the truth of the whole of the Christian theistic faith, though almost always with the case turning on the evidence for Jesus' death and resurrection.

The two approaches make common cause in rejecting outright the philosophical movement known as postmodernism. Both emphasize the irrational nature of the relativism that is at the heart of the postmodernist agenda. Whereas classical apologists typically analyze postmodernism as a philosophy or worldview, though, evidentialists often treat it more as a cultural trend that at bottom is still modernist. Postmodernists are really not relativists; they have instead substituted a new set of absolutes or standards for the Judeo-Christian absolutes. In matters of ordinary fact, evidentialists find that most people today still operate on the assumption that the facts are objective, knowable truths. At least some evidentialists in this sense affirm that facts "speak for themselves."

Evidentialists do not believe, however, that factual evidence in and of itself produces faith, and in fact most of them deny believing that faith requires evidence; faith is based on the witness of the Holy Spirit. Evidentialists do maintain that what sets Christianity apart from other

religions is that it is rooted in facts that are in principle verifiable on the basis of publicly accessible evidence.

2. What is the relationship between apologetics and theology?

Evidentialists view the relationship between apologetics and theology as one of defense and exposition of the same truth. That is, apologetics offers a reasoned defense of the Christian beliefs that are explained and defined in theology. Moreover, apologetics and theology utilize essentially the same method. Both reason inductively from the data or facts to conclusions using a method similar to what is used in the sciences. The apologist appeals to facts *about* and *from* the Bible to show that Christianity is *true*; the theologian appeals to facts *of* the Bible to show what Christianity *means*. Most evidentialists are not Reformed in theology; they run a gamut from moderately conservative, Arminian Protestants (for example, Swinburne, Pinnock) to very conservative Lutherans (Montgomery).

3. Should apologetics engage in a philosophical defense of the Christian faith?

Evidentialists view philosophy as a critical tool for understanding the implications of the sciences in matters beyond the sciences' direct competency. For example, while the sciences cannot examine God, they can examine the world he created and infer his existence from the evidence in the world. Thus evidentialists do use philosophy, but primarily as a means of clarifying concepts and analyzing the methods and reasoning used in discussing matters of theological significance in the light of natural science and of human history. For evidentialists, when philosophy seeks to construct positive answers to ultimate issues apart from facts, it is merely speculative.

4. Can science be used to defend the Christian faith?

Of the four apologetic approaches, evidentialism makes the most positive use of science. While evidentialists do not accept all conventional scientific theories uncritically, they tend to be more confident in their use of scientific information and theories to support theistic conclusions than the other approaches. They also tend to adhere to a realist view of science—typically assuming such a view without discussion. Some evidentialists are theistic evolutionists, but most are old-earth creationists.

5. Can the Christian faith be supported by historical inquiry?

While evidentialists tend to make confident and even enthusiastic use of science in apologetics, most of them base their apologetic primarily, and in some cases exclusively, on historical evidence. In their view the Christian faith in its essence involves belief that God has done certain things in history for our salvation, specifically in the death and resurrection of Jesus. They recognize that many people view historical knowledge as too subjective or uncertain to be the basis of faith. They admit that historical knowledge as such can never rise above probability, but contend that this is so with all knowledge of matters of fact, yet we base life-and-death decisions on such knowledge every day. Furthermore, they argue that there is plenty of evidence for the historicity of the central events of the Christian faith.

6. How is our knowledge of Christian truth related to our experience?

Evidentialists recognize that people have religious experiences. However, while they acknowledge that some of these are genuine encounters with God, they point out that such

experiences are also common in non-Christian religions. Personal, subjective experiences are meaningful or helpful only to the persons experiencing them. If we are to commend the truth of Christianity to people, evidentialists conclude, we must appeal to publicly accessible facts. Testimonies of changed lives may help people see that Christianity is not *only* about events in the past, but the “evidence that demands a verdict” is to be found in history.

APOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Apologetic questions deal with issues commonly raised by non-Christians themselves. In chapter 10 we considered the approach evidentialism takes to answering questions about the Bible, Christianity and other beliefs, the existence of God, the problem of evil, the credibility of miracles, and the claims of Jesus Christ. Here we summarize our findings in that chapter.

1. Why should we believe in the Bible?

Most evidentialists begin their apologetic by presenting evidence, not for the inspiration of the Bible, but for its historical reliability. They emphasize the authenticity of the biblical text as it has been passed down through the centuries as well as the historical credibility of its contents. In particular they focus on the historical value of the Gospels and Paul’s epistles as source material for information about Jesus’ death and resurrection. They want to use this material to present their central apologetic argument, namely, that the historical facts show that Jesus rose from the dead. In turn, Jesus’ resurrection will validate Jesus’ teaching and, by extension, the teaching of the entire Bible.

Like classical apologists, then, evidentialists affirm that we believe in the Bible because we believe in the God revealed in Christ—not the other way around. But for evidentialists it is

not necessary to convince people that a God exists before presenting evidence for the divine inspiration of the Bible. In addition to the historical argument outlined above, they appeal to fulfilled prophecy as evidence arising from the Bible itself for the existence of a God who knows the future.

2. Don't all religions lead to God?

The major premise of religious pluralism is that all religions are basically alike. Evidentialists attack this premise directly by appealing to the historically verifiable miracles of the Bible, especially the resurrection of Jesus, as proof of the uniqueness of Christianity. Whereas other religions represent mankind's best guesses, intuitions, or mystical religious experiences, none of which can be verified as based on truth, Christianity alone represents God's direct intervention into human history to redeem mankind.

3. How do we know that God exists?

Evidentialists typically do not reject the classical theistic proofs (other than the ontological argument, which all evidentialists reject). However, they do rework them into fact-based, evidentiary arguments to augment or replace the classical deductive, philosophical proofs. The cosmological and teleological arguments are the arguments of choice here, commonly articulated using the scientific evidence for the big bang (which proves the universe had a beginning) and for the intricate, delicate balance and design of the universe to sustain life. Evidentialists also point to miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and other evidences from the Bible to support belief in the existence of God.

4. If God does exist, why does he permit evil?

Classical apologists usually address the problem of evil in its most historically familiar form as a logical conundrum: How can God be all-powerful and all-loving, yet permit evil? Evidentialists may discuss the problem in this form, too, but they most characteristically deal with it as a matter of probability or evidence. That is, in more recent anti-theistic polemic the nontheist often adduces the great, often inexplicable evils of the world not as a logical disproof of God's existence, but as evidence showing God's existence to be improbable or unlikely. In turn, the evidentialist seeks to answer whether these evils really are evidence that "counts" against God's existence, and also whether there is sufficient evidence in favor of God's existence to counterbalance the evidence of evil. Evidentialists point out various reasons why certain evils may be present in the world, and argue that the positive evidence for God's existence is so great that the problem of evil does not make his existence unlikely.

5. Aren't the miracles of the Bible spiritual myths or legends and not literal fact?

To the question of whether miracles are myths or facts, evidentialists answer simply, look at the evidence. They agree that it is reasonable to be somewhat skeptical of miracle claims; they insist, though, that it is unreasonable to decide that no amount of evidence could ever warrant belief that a miracle had occurred. While belief in God certainly makes miracle claims somewhat more believable, one still must question such claims and determine if there is evidence for them. Moreover, evidentialists maintain that in some cases the evidence for a miracle is so great that even a person who does not already believe in God can and should recognize it as a miracle. Thus they think the evidence for miracles can provide rational grounds for belief in God's existence.

6. Why should I believe in Jesus?

Nearly all evidentialists view the resurrection of Jesus as the primary factual basis for faith in Jesus. It is Jesus’ resurrection that vindicates his claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and that also reveals his death to have been a redemptive sacrifice for sins. The origin and history of the church would be unintelligible without the Resurrection. Other lines of evidence—for creation, for the historical reliability of the Bible, for the life and miracles of Jesus, for fulfilled prophecy in the Bible—supplement and converge on this point. Evidentialists argue that people should believe in Jesus because the facts show him to be what the Bible says he is.

The following table presents an overview of the evidentialist model of apologetics with these twelve questions in mind.

Issue		Position
<i>Metapologetics</i>	Knowledge	Fitting of the facts is the primary test of truth Postmodernism is unrealistic Spirit’s witness is the ground of faith
	Theology	Apologetics and theology use scientific method Apologetics defends debated aspects of theology
	Philosophy	Apologetics uses philosophy’s critical tools Methodological use of non-Christian philosophy
	Science	Freely accepts established theories Science and theology view same facts differently Typically old-earth creationism
	History	Objective view of history quite realizable Right view of history requires right method
	Experience	Religious experiences possible but not reliable Test private experiences by public facts
	Scripture	Scripture the source of evidence for apologetic Begin with reliability, conclude with inspiration Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration, proves God

<i>Apologetics</i>	Religions	Religious pluralism ignores gospel's factual basis Christianity makes uniquely verifiable claims
	God	Generally inductive proofs favored Design argument most common
	Evil	Inductive problem of evil: Is theism likely? Evidence for God holds up despite evil
	Miracles	Miracles add evidence for a theistic worldview Miracles not to be believed unless good evidence
	Jesus	Jesus' resurrection can be proved historically False dilemma: Jesus of history or Christ of faith

Evidentialism Illustrated

In this second of four dialogues we will present in this book, a Christian named Joe becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while riding a city bus. Joe is a researcher in the city's police crime lab. He has read a lot about, and talked with people of, various different religions, and is especially interested in the New Age movement. Joe likes a variety of apologetics authors, including John Warwick Montgomery. When he boards the bus, he sits in front of Sarah and Murali, who are already deep in conversation about a devastating earthquake that has been in the news.

Murali: In India, where I come from, most people believe that things like this happen because of karma. The people who died in the earthquake were meant to die, and they will come back in reincarnation to live again.

Sarah: Some people here in America believe that, too, but I don't. I don't think there's any life after death. When you die, that's it.

Murali: You may be right, although I hope not. I don't know what I think about this anymore. I don't think anybody really knows. Our religions help us feel better about life, and they may be right about there being life after death, but no one knows for sure.

Joe: Excuse me—I couldn't help overhearing what you were talking about. My name is Joe.
May I say something?

Murali: Of course. I am Murali, and this is Sarah.

Joe: I think it is possible to know about life after death.

Murali: How?

Joe: Well, suppose someone died and then came back to life, and he was able to tell you about what lies beyond death and how we need to prepare for it. That would be one way to know.

Sarah: Yeah, but no one has ever done that.

Joe: Actually, someone has. Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, and he has told us all about God and how we can live forever in God's presence.

Sarah: Oh, no. You're one of those Bible-thumping Christians. Murali, you gotta watch out for these guys. They're always going around saying that you have to believe in Jesus.

Joe: Guilty as charged, although I promise not to thump you with my Bible. I did bring one, though.

Murali: I have heard this before, of course, that Jesus rose from the dead. It is a beautiful story, but you don't take it literally, do you?

Joe: Again, guilty as charged. I certainly do take it literally. Jesus is not a mythical character. He was a real, flesh-and-blood man who lived almost two thousand years ago in a real place.

Murali: Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to suggest that Jesus never lived. That is obvious. But the story of his coming back to life—why would you take that literally?

Joe: Well, for one thing, because the people who first told this “story” said that it really happened. They specifically denied that it was a made-up story.

Murali: When did they say that?

Sarah: Now you've gone and done it. He's going to start quoting the Bible at you.

Joe: You're right, Sarah, but I won't ask you or Murali to take the Bible's word for anything. In fact, I encourage you to examine the evidence to see whether what the Bible writers say about Jesus is true or not.

Murali: That seems fair.

Joe: In 2 Peter 1:16 the apostle Peter wrote, “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” You see, Peter is saying that the stories they told about Jesus were not made-up myths or fairy tales, but were eyewitness testimony. And you find this kind of statement throughout the New Testament.

Sarah: But everyone knows that these things were written down long after Jesus had died. Scholars say the Gospels were written about a hundred years after Jesus.

Joe: I'm curious about those scholars. But before I say anything about that, can we agree at least that the New Testament *claims* that the resurrection of Jesus is not a myth, but is an historical fact told to us by eyewitnesses?

Murali: That does seem to be what it claims, yes. At least in that one verse that you read to us.

Sarah: Well, I'm not convinced. How do you know that the Gospels claim to be historical fact?

Joe: A fair question. Let me give you a couple of easy examples. In Luke 1:1-4, Luke tells us that there were “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,” and that these eyewitnesses had “handed down” to us what had happened. And Luke says that he “investigated everything carefully from the beginning” before writing it down, “so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.” In other words, Luke says his Gospel is based on eyewitness testimony, and that he did historical research in order to write an accurate account. Now in the Gospel of John, it tells us that soldiers stabbed Jesus on the cross with a spear to make sure he was dead. The author then says in John 19:35, “And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.” So, the author of the Gospel of John claims to have been an eyewitness to the death of Jesus, as well as to many other things, of course.

Sarah: All right, I guess the Gospels, or at least those two Gospels, claim to be telling historical fact. But how can we be sure about anything they tell us? Like I said, they were written about a hundred years after the fact.

Joe: You did say that. But Sarah, the fact is that no biblical scholar says the Gospels were written a hundred years later. Jesus died in A.D. 33. The latest dates given by scholars put the Gospel of Mark around the year 70, about forty years after Jesus’ death, and the Gospel of John around the year 100, or about seventy years after Jesus’ death. And some biblical scholars, including the radical theologian John A. T. Robinson, have argued that all of the Gospels were written before the year 70. I have some literature on this subject that I can get for you if you’re interested.

Murali: You seem to know what you're talking about. But even forty years is a long time. Isn't it possible that the story of Jesus developed over the years into the story we now have?

Joe: I don't see how, if John was himself an eyewitness, as he says he was. Besides, the Gospels aren't the earliest books of the New Testament. The epistles of the apostle Paul were written between about the years 50 and 65. In other words, Paul was writing about Jesus' resurrection less than twenty years after it happened. And Paul himself saw Jesus alive after his death.

Sarah: It's my understanding that some of those epistles weren't even written by Paul.

Joe: That is the opinion of many scholars today, but by no means all of them. But I'll tell you what. I'll stick to the epistles that all biblical scholars agree were written by Paul. For example, in Galatians, which was one of Paul's first epistles, he writes at length about the fact that he was a persecutor of the church until Jesus appeared to him and called him to be an apostle. And in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says he and the other apostles all had the same message, which was that Jesus had died, had been buried, had been raised from the dead, and had appeared to them and to many others. So here we see proof that Christians had been proclaiming Jesus' resurrection as an historical fact from the very beginning of the church. It wasn't a myth that developed gradually over many years.

Murali: This is very interesting. I have never heard these facts before. But tell me, Joe: Are you saying that Paul and these other apostles actually saw Jesus alive from the dead? Could it be that what they experienced was some sort of vision? Perhaps they had a vision of Jesus in a higher state of consciousness, and they gained comfort and encouragement from that vision.

Joe: That's a good question. I think Paul is very clear about what he means. Let me read 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 to you. It says "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried." Now, let me stop right there. Why do you suppose Paul mentioned Jesus' burial? Why would that be important?

Murali: Now it is your turn to ask a good question. I don't know. Perhaps he mentioned it to make the point that Jesus was really dead?

Joe: Excellent! I think you're exactly right. Now, the next thing Paul says is "that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared." Let me stop there again. Paul says that Jesus died, and then he points to Jesus' burial as proof of that fact. Paul then says that Jesus was raised, and he points to Jesus' appearances as proof of his resurrection. When you take it all together, it's clear that Paul is talking about Jesus being raised physically from the grave. That's the whole point of mentioning Jesus' burial between his death and resurrection. Remember, Paul was a Pharisee, a Jewish rabbi, who had become a Christian. In his vocabulary, for a man to be buried and then to have been raised meant just one thing: the man's grave was empty and he was alive from the dead.

Sarah: You may be right; that may have been what Paul was saying. But why should we believe him? Why should we take his word for it?

Joe: What are the alternatives? If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, why do you suppose Paul would say that he had been? Was he lying?

Sarah: No, I don't think he was lying. Maybe Paul had some kind of hallucination and thought he saw Jesus.

Joe: What about all of the others who saw Jesus? Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to Peter, the other apostles, and to more than five hundred people at one time. Were they all hallucinating?

Sarah: Well, I don't know if I take that five hundred number seriously.

Joe: I don't know why not. But let's leave them aside, if you like. Do you really think that Peter, James, and the other apostles all had hallucinations of Jesus? That doesn't seem very likely, does it?

Sarah: It seems much more likely than the idea that a dead man came back to life.

Joe: Normally, Sarah, I'd agree with you. But in this case, the idea that Jesus came back to life is much more likely to be true than that over a dozen men, some of whom loved Jesus, some of whom hated Jesus, all had hallucinations of Jesus alive from the dead. You see, if we heard that your aunt Edna or my cousin Jasper had died and come back to life, we'd probably dismiss the idea out of hand. After all, why should Aunt Edna or Cousin Jasper rise from the dead? There's no rhyme or reason to it. But with Jesus, there is a very good reason. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. He claimed to have come to overcome sin and death for all humanity, and to bring eternal life. He is reported to have performed many miracles, including resuscitating people who had died. He was executed on Passover, a Jewish feast that celebrated God's deliverance of his people from bondage. Given all that we know about Jesus, his being raised from the dead makes perfect sense. God raised him from the dead to vindicate him as the Messiah and to bring to us the promise of eternal life if we trust in him.

Murali: You make an interesting case. But what you just said bothers me. You are saying, if I understand you correctly, that one must believe in Jesus to have eternal life. But I cannot

accept the idea that God loves Christians but does not love Hindus or Buddhists or Muslims. Throughout the world for centuries people have killed each other because they were of a different religion. This intolerance is so destructive.

Joe: I certainly agree with you that it is terribly wrong to kill people because they are of a different religion. In fact, my religion considers such killing to be a grievous sin. We believe that God loves people of all nations and races, and it is our duty to tell them the good news of God's love for them in Jesus Christ.

Murali: But why must they believe in Jesus to have God's love? Surely God already loves them.

Joe: In a sense, you're right, of course. But there is a problem. We human beings—all of us, of whatever religion, or of no religion—are sinners.

Sarah: That's so judgmental.

Joe: Not at all. I'm not saying anything about you or anyone else that doesn't also apply to me. I'm a sinner, too. None of us is morally perfect, and all of us are alienated from God until we come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Murali: This idea of sin is difficult for me. But I see that my stop is coming up. I must go.

Sarah: Me, too. It's been interesting, Joe.

Murali: Yes, very.

Joe: Let me give you my phone number and e-mail address and you can contact me at your convenience if you decide you'd like to continue this discussion.

Murali and Sarah: Okay!

Notable Strengths of Evidentialist Apologetics

As we did with classical apologetics in chapter 7, we will here review the most common and important observations that have been made as to the notable strengths and potential weaknesses of the evidentialist apologetic model.

RECOGNIZES THAT PROBABILITY IS UNAVOIDABLE

Evidentialists readily admit that the conclusions available through the inductive process of historical inquiry are probable, not certain. But they are quick to add that *no* decision in life is based on deductive certainty. Deduction can reveal whether a conclusion follows from certain premises, but it cannot tell us whether premises correspond to truth about the real world. In all matters of fact, we are dependent on human observation and human interpretation, both of which are fallible. Because we will never have *all* the facts, we can never arrive at absolute certainty from our analysis and interpretation of the facts. But this does not stop us from reaching conclusions and making decisions in law courts, scientific laboratories, or business meetings. William Dyrness observes that “it is inadmissible to ask more of a line of reasoning than it can possibly give. Historical judgments are based on available records. No historical data can ever be conclusive. In historical reasoning, therefore, we can expect only probability, and we must not be disappointed when we cannot have certainty. The uncertainty here is not with Christianity, but with the tenuous nature of historical argumentation.”¹

Even if the validity of inductive, probabilistic arguments is acknowledged, the way such arguments are developed is often questioned. For example, some critics regard the cumulative-case approach to argumentation, frequently used by evidentialists, as akin to a series of leaky buckets. Antony Flew put the point most succinctly: “If one leaky bucket will not hold water there is no reason to think that ten can.”² This is not to say that Flew rejected all empirical

argument. However, he distinguished cumulative arguments in which each element has real evidentiary value from those in which each element is really valueless. “We have here to insist upon a sometimes tricky distinction: between, on the one hand, the valid principle of the accumulation of evidence, where every item has at least some weight in its own right; and, on the other hand, the Ten-leaky-buckets-Tactic, applied to arguments none of which hold water at all.”³

Richard Swinburne addresses the leaky-bucket objection head-on: “For clearly if you jam ten leaky buckets together in such a way that holes in the bottom of each bucket are squashed close to solid parts of the bottoms of neighbouring buckets, you will get a container that will hold water.”⁴ Douglas Geivett, though, worries that Swinburne’s super bucket “can be expected, at best, to retard the leak,” not to “prevent eventual drainage.”⁵ He distinguishes the approach of inference to the best explanation from the informal cumulative-case approach of Basil Mitchell and the rigorously formal use of confirmation theory by Swinburne to build a cumulative-case argument.

Some evidentialists prefer the analogy of a rope. Irwin H. Linton, in *A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, writes: “It is a commonplace that while one thread of a three stranded rope may possibly be broken, the three strands twisted together and each multiplying the strength of the others may produce a tensile strength beyond the power to overcome.”⁶ J. P. Moreland, an apologist whose approach straddles the classical and evidentialist models, states flatly that “the leaky bucket metaphor is the wrong one. A rope metaphor is more appropriate. Just as several strands make a rope stronger than just a few strands, so the many-stranded case for God is made stronger than would be the case with only a few strands of evidence.”⁷

The leaky-bucket analogy is just that, an analogy. While it makes a valid point, it may have been overanalyzed a bit. Flew himself acknowledged that one may argue from an accumulation of evidence. His caution is one that many evidentialists take seriously. It does not overturn the fact that arguments designed to show that something is true in the real world will inevitably fall short of demonstrative, deductive proof.

APPEALING METHODS OF INQUIRY

One of the great strengths of the evidentialist approach is its use of methods of inquiry already familiar and acceptable to many non-Christians. As Mark Hanna acknowledges, evidentialism “recognizes the unavoidability of making use of ordinary ways of knowing in order to become aware of God’s self-revelation in Scripture.”⁸ Since the goal of apologetics is to persuade people that Christianity is true, or at least that it is reasonable to believe it is true, arguments that employ strategies familiar to those being persuaded are so much more likely to be effective. And it is undeniable that evidentialist apologetics has enjoyed great success.

Evidentialists emphasize that daily communication between believers and unbelievers requires a commonly held logic and world of experience.⁹ Without this commonality, communication and dialogue would be impossible.

STRESSES THE FACTUAL EVIDENCE

If the goal of Christian apologetics is to defend the truth of Christianity, and if truth is understood as correspondence with reality, then an apologetic that emphasizes the factual reality of Christianity is mandatory. Evidentialism is defined by the primacy it assigns to fact.

Montgomery argues that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, which teaches that God entered the human sphere in the person of the God-man, repudiates any attempt to divorce “Christian facts” from secular, nonreligious facts.¹⁰ Truth must be factually based, and Christian truth can be verified by objective, public evidence.

Evidentialists stress the importance of empirical content in the substantiation of the Christian worldview. They focus on the historicity of Christianity and approach the Bible as a primary historical document. Montgomery has made a particularly significant contribution in this regard. As Ronald H. Nash has stated, “No conservative theologian has done more to articulate the nature and importance of the relationship between Christian faith and history than John Warwick Montgomery.”¹¹ Even some of his critics acknowledge the importance of his stress on the empirical study and investigation of history.¹² For Montgomery, the historical Incarnation provides an answer to Flew’s parable of the gardener, because “central to the Christian position is the historically grounded assertion that *the Gardener entered the garden*: God actually appeared in the empirical world in Jesus Christ and fully manifested his deity through miraculous acts in general and his resurrection from the dead in particular.”¹³

Montgomery claims that if the Resurrection event is granted, it cannot be regarded as trivial because of its profound implications for the universal problem of death.¹⁴ The fact of the Resurrection and its meaning are conjoined in the context of Christ’s own claims. “Christ’s resurrection can be examined by non-Christians as well as by Christians. Its factual character, when considered in light of the claims of the One raised from the dead, points not to a multiplicity of equally possible interpretations, but to a single ‘best’ interpretation (to an interpretation most consistent with the data), namely the deity of Christ (John 2:18-22).”¹⁵

Not all evidentialists agree with Montgomery that historical events are self-interpreting, but they agree that while facts do not create faith, they are essential for faith. R. N. Williams writes that a perceptual shift can take place in the logic of the whole situation that can move a person beyond the level of fact to an illumination of the facts from a new perspective. In this sense biblical miracles “were intended to conduct, not to compel, men to faith.”¹⁶ Fact does not force faith, but faith cannot be divorced from fact. Montgomery argues that the factual evidence leaves non-Christians with no excuse:

Of course, sinful self-interest may tempt the non-Christian to avoid the weight of evidence, just as self-interest has so frequently corrupted investigation in other purely secular matters. But selfish perversions of data or interpretation can be made plain in the area of revelational fact no less than in the nonrevelational sphere, for Christian revelation occurred in time—in the secular world. To miss this point is to miss the character of the Incarnation.¹⁷

Potential Weaknesses of Evidentialist Apologetics

Evidentialist apologetics has been widely criticized from a number of perspectives. We will consider here some of the most common and important criticisms identifying potential weaknesses in or challenges to the evidentialist approach.¹⁸

ASSUMES THE THEISTIC WORLDVIEW

The principal objection to evidentialism from a classical apologetics perspective is that it attempts to make a case for the theistic worldview on the basis of facts. According to both

classical apologists and most Reformed apologists, this will not work; one must first have a worldview before one can interpret the facts in the world. As Geisler puts it, “facts and events have ultimate meaning only within and by virtue of the context of the world view in which they are conceived.”¹⁹ Geisler explains that

evidence gains its meaning only by its immediate and overall context; and evidence as such cannot, without begging the question, be used to establish the overall context by which it obtains its very meaning as evidence. . . . it is a vicious circle to argue that a given fact (say, the resuscitation of Christ’s body) is evidence of a certain truth claim (say, Christ’s claim to be God), unless it can be established that the event comes in the context of a theistic universe.²⁰

Geisler adds that meaning is not inherent in historical facts and events; meaning demands an interpretive context that is distinct from the facts and events.²¹ Apologists from other perspectives agree that evidentialists tacitly assume the validity of the theistic worldview from the beginning.²²

One possible response to this criticism is that it assumes that non-Christians will rigorously screen out any and all facts that do not fit consistently in their worldviews, regardless of the evidence. No doubt non-Christians do this a lot, but the evidentialist thinks that the facts can also undermine those false worldviews when the evidence is cogently presented.

USES HIDDEN PRESUPPOSITIONS

It is the contention of evidentialists that metaphysical presuppositions can be minimized in apologetics. Batts asserts that “Montgomery rightly emphasizes that the historical method (the scientific method as applied to historical phenomena) assumes as little as possible and provides

for the objective discovery of as much as possible.”²³ But critics of evidentialism contend that evidentialists work with hidden presuppositions about the nature of reality. For example, in their scientific and historical arguments, evidentialists presuppose that there is a rational structure to the whole of reality.²⁴ The heuristic, methodological assumptions that knowledge is possible, that the universe is structured, and that the senses can be trusted cannot themselves be empirically substantiated.²⁵ Clark charges that Montgomery as an empiricist is as much a “dogmatist” on sensation as the presuppositionalist is on revelation; he cannot provide any evidence for his own first principle.²⁶ Carl F. H. Henry likewise states, “Empiricists always operate on presuppositions which they cannot prove by their own methodology.”²⁷

Montgomery admits that “a prioris must lie at the basis of every procedure,” but says that “they should be kept to a minimum, and be as self-evident and beyond dispute as much as possible.”²⁸ Because of this, Henry has commented that “Montgomery differs from the presuppositionalists he disowns only in the number and scope of the presuppositions he prefers for deciphering the meaning of history.”²⁹

Montgomery’s presuppositions are not only epistemological but also metaphysical. “Metaphysical presuppositions are implicit in every epistemology, and epistemological presuppositions are implicit in every metaphysics.”³⁰ It is therefore impossible to separate epistemological assumptions from metaphysical ones. The assumption that the mind can perceive reality, for example, is an assumption *about reality*, that is, a metaphysical assumption. Montgomery and all evidentialists unavoidably import Christian presuppositions into their apologetic methodology. Thom Notaro writes:

[Pinnock and Montgomery] seem unaware that they, as believers, are sitting on a gold-mine of presuppositions. In the past they have dipped into that hidden treasure most

noticeably when confronted with the question of biblical inerrancy, yet without admitting the cash-value of the presuppositional method. . . . all Christian apologists presuppose certain biblical commitments, regardless of whether they are willing to *call* them presuppositions. The wide discrepancy between Christian apologists arises from the varying degrees of consistency with which they honor those commitments in their apologetic method.³¹

Evidentialists are generally unmoved by these concerns. They freely acknowledge that evidential arguments require certain assumptions about the reality of our physical world, the ability of the mind to perceive reality, and the like. What the evidentialist wants is not to make arguments that are totally free of presuppositions but rather arguments that presuppose only what must be presupposed to know anything at all. This challenge to the evidentialist approach, then, identifies a real limitation of the approach but one with which evidentialists insist everyone must live in order to know anything or reason about anything.

UNDERESTIMATES THE HUMAN FACTOR

Both classical and evidentialist apologists are often criticized for an excessive optimism in assuming that unbelievers are willing and able to examine the evidence for Christianity in an open, honest, and unprejudiced way. Empirically oriented apologists in particular are said to place too much confidence in the persuasive value of evidences and erroneously assume a stance of historical objectivity, forgetting that the significance of historical facts is in fact determined by one's presuppositional framework. For example, Henry declares that Pinnock's empirical method

requires a herculean burden of demonstration that no evangelical theologian, however devout or brilliant, can successfully carry. For Pinnock seems to imply . . . that, without any appeal to transcendent divine revelation and by empirical considerations alone, the ordinary unregenerate man can be logically and inescapably driven to a Christian understanding of reality, and that any insistence on the invalidity of such empirical argumentation is due solely to volitional recalcitrance and not at all to empirical evidential deficiencies.³²

Along similar lines, evidentialists are accused of unrealistically minimizing the effect of sin on unregenerate cognition and volition. According to critics, Montgomery and others overestimate the ability of the unbeliever, in Montgomery's words, to "understand the factual nature of the world and rationally interpret the data of his experience."³³ Hillman, for example, who is critical of both the presuppositional and evidentialist models, contends, "If it is true that Van Til emphasizes too greatly the inability of man to perceive truth, then it is also true that Montgomery's approach is too greatly weighted in favor of man's ability to understand and to respond to the truth of God."³⁴ Some evidentialists, however, acknowledge the effects of sin on human reasoning; they appeal to the common and special grace of God in overcoming these cognitive and volitional barriers.

The following table summarizes the major notable strengths and potential weaknesses that have been perceived in the evidentialist model of apologetics.

Evidentialist Apologetics	
<i>Notable Strengths</i>	<i>Potential Weaknesses</i>
Recognizes that probability cannot be avoided in apologetic arguments	Does not provide worldview context needed to assess probability

Uses methods of inquiry that are often appealing to non-Christians	Has hidden presuppositions in its application of the methods it uses
Emphasizes the importance of the factual evidence for Christianity	Diminishes the role of personal factors affecting perception of facts

Conclusion

So far we have examined two models of apologetics, the classical and evidentialist models. In some ways these two models are very similar. Both models attempt to make a case for the truth of Christianity that will be accessible to the non-Christian who follows the argument openly and honestly. The classical model is generally more rationalist while the evidentialist model is characteristically more empiricist. The classical model follows a two-step approach (prove theism, then prove Christianity on the assumption of theism), while the evidentialist model follows a cumulative-case approach (scientific and historical evidences combine to prove Christian theism). But the two strategies share a common understanding of the apologetic task: commending the Christian faith to non-Christians on the basis of truths that they already believe.

It is this very understanding of apologetics that is at the heart of many of the criticisms made of both models. Such an understanding, it has been urged, fails to take into account the great disparity between the Christian and non-Christian mindsets. The two models, many apologists now believe, both assume that Christianity can be proved to non-Christians on their own terms, without challenging their own most basic assumptions or presuppositions. To correct this faulty assumption, a third model of apologetics, which we call Reformed apologetics, has been developed. It is the Reformed approach that will be examined next.

For Further Study

Geisler, Norman L. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.

See especially the article on “Historical Apologetics” (318-320) for an evaluation of the usual type of evidentialism.

Habermas, Gary R., and Antony G. N. Flew. *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*. Edited by Terry L. Miethe. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987. An excellent example of an evidentialist in debate.

¹William Dyrness, *Christian Apologetics in a World Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983), 58.

²Antony G. N. Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London, 1966), 63.

³*Ibid.*, 141.

⁴Swinburne, *Existence of God*, 14 n.

⁵Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God*, 92.

⁶Irwin H. Linton, *A Lawyer Examines the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1943), 195.

⁷J. P. Moreland, “Atheism and Leaky Buckets: The Christian Rope Pulls Tighter,” in *Does God Exist? The Debate between Theists and Atheists* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1993), 240. Oddly, Moreland goes on to assert that a series of leaky buckets are “related to one another in a chain” while “strands of rope work independently of each other” (240-241). In fact, strands woven into a rope act in a mutual *dependence* in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

⁸Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics*, 97.

⁹Diehl, “Historical Apologetics,” 6.

¹⁰Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact*, 33-34.

¹¹Ronald H. Nash, “Use and Abuse of History in Christian Apologetics,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 1 (1971): 217.

¹²W. Stanford Reid, “Subjectivity or Objectivity in Historical Understanding,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, edited by Geehan, 418-419.

¹³Montgomery, “Is Man His Own God?” in *Suicide of Christian Theology*, 261.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 263-264.

¹⁵Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact*, 34.

¹⁶Rheinalt Nantlais Williams, *Faith, Facts, History, Science—and How They Fit Together* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1973), 85.

¹⁷Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact*, 34.

¹⁸Several articles explicating and defending Montgomery’s apologetic appeared in the *Global Journal of Classical Theology* 3, 1 (March 2002): Ross Clifford, “Justification of the Legal Apologetic of John Warwick Montgomery: An Apologetic for All Seasons”; Gary Habermas, “Greg Bahnsen, John Warwick Montgomery, and Evidential Apologetics”; Craig Hazen, “‘Ever Hearing but Never Understanding’: A Response to Mark Hutchins’s Critique of John Warwick Montgomery’s Historical Apologetics”; and Boyd Pehrson, “How Not to Critique Legal Apologetics: A Lesson from a Skeptic’s Internet Web Page Objections.” These articles were accessed online at < http://www.trinitysem.edu/journal/toc_v3n1.html >.

¹⁹Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 95.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 95, emphasis deleted.

²¹*Ibid.*, 96.

²²Reid, “Subjectivity or Objectivity,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, edited by Geehan, 409; cf. Hanna, *Crucial Questions*, 100; Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976-1983), 1:231.

²³Martin Batts, “A Summary and Critique of the Historical Apologetic of John Warwick Montgomery” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), 87-88.

²⁴Hanna, *Crucial Questions*, 100.

²⁵Dennis Roy Hillman, “The Use of Basic Issues in Apologetics from Selected New Testament Apologies” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), 54.

²⁶Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 117.

²⁷Henry, 1:231.

²⁸John Warwick Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past: A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1962; reprint, 1975), 265, emphasis deleted.

²⁹Henry, 1:231.

³⁰Hanna, *Crucial Questions*, 100.

³¹Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 102, 105.

³²Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:220.

³³Montgomery, “The Place of Reason—Part 1,” *His*, February 1966, 12.

³⁴Hillman, “Use of Basic Issues in Apologetics,” 55.