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Apologetics and the Subjectivity of Faith

In this concluding chapter on fideism, 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 Fideist 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 fideist model.

METAPOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Metapologetic questions deal with the relation of apologetics to other forms of human knowledge. In chapter 17 we considered the approach taken in fideism 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?

Fideists argue that the only proper ground on which to claim that Christianity is the truth is that God has personally revealed himself in Christ. Christianity is essentially not a body of knowledge or a worldview, but a personal relationship with God in Christ. Faith in Christ is created and sustained by the witness of the Holy Spirit to Christ. Fideists argue that the other apologetic approaches are wedded to modernist notions of rationality, as seen in their efforts to develop Christianity into a comprehensive “worldview.”

2. What is the relationship between apologetics and theology?

According to Karl Barth, who is representative of a mature fideism in this regard, the best apologetics is a good dogmatics, or Christian theology. That is, the best way to persuade people to believe in Christ is to give an accurate witness to the meaning of God’s revelation in Christ and its significance for our lives. Apologetics should not be viewed as a separate discipline establishing the truth or the possibility of theology, as in classical apologetics.

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

Fideists adamantly oppose the philosophical defense of the Christian faith. Apologists should study philosophy in order to contrast the way of philosophy with the way of faith, which are diametrically opposed. Christianity is not an intellectual system to be rationally defended, but a relationship with God in Christ to be personally experienced.

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

According to fideism, science can neither support the truth of Christianity nor undermine it, because science and theology deal with different questions. As a consequence, fideists tend to be open to theistic evolution, though not all fideists actually accept evolutionism.

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

It is a major characteristic of fideism that historical apologetics is firmly rejected. Historical argument can at best end in approximate knowledge and probability, an inadequate basis for the certainty of faith. Christ is objectively revealed in Scripture, but it is not possible or desirable to seek an objective account of the details of Jesus' historical life.

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

According to fideists, in some sense faith is self-attesting, because it is produced by the work of the Spirit. Thus our experience of genuine faith can be the basis of our confidence in the truth about Christ. This does not mean that the truth or even our assurance of the truth has no objective basis, since God has objectively revealed himself in Christ, but that without the subjective dimension of faith the objective revelation is not recognizable as such.

APOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Apologetic questions deal with issues commonly raised by non-Christians. In chapter 18 we considered fideist responses to 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?

Actually, for fideists our faith is not in the Bible, but in Christ, to whom the Bible as Scripture gives reliable witness. We believe the Bible insofar as and because in it we encounter Jesus Christ, the living Word.

2. Don't all religions lead to God?

Fideists argue that no religion, not even Christianity considered as such, leads to God. It is in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that we are reconciled to God, not in religion. By God's grace the religion of Christianity bears witness to Christ and is in that sense the only true religion.

3. How do we know that God exists?

To put it simply, fideists argue that we know that God exists only if we know God personally; and we come to know God personally only in Jesus Christ. They reject all attempts to prove that God exists.

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

Fideists contend that we are really not in a position to know or understand why God has permitted things to happen as they have, but such knowledge is not really what we need. What we need is to know that we can trust God. Knowing that God is God really is to know that God is trustworthy; and we come to know God's goodness and love in Jesus Christ, whose suffering and death definitively reveal God's concern for our plight.

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

Fideists argue that we should not try to prove that miracles are possible or that they have happened; nor should we believe in miracles merely because they are reported in the Bible. Rather, we believe that miracles have occurred because in those miracles we see fleshed out *the* miracle of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

6. Why should I believe in Jesus?

Fideists reject any and all direct apologetic arguments for belief in Jesus. On the other hand, they do typically employ indirect arguments for belief in Jesus, notably that the Christian message about Jesus is something no human would ever have invented. Ultimately, though, fideists urge non-Christians to read the New Testament and meet Jesus there. As with any person, the best and only way to know the truth about Jesus is to get to know him personally.

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

Issue		Position
<i>Metapologetics</i>	Knowledge	Faithfulness to revelation is the test of truth Postmodernism exposes modernism in apologetics Spirit's witness to Christ produces faith
	Theology	Good theology is the best apologetics Apologetics cannot prepare for or justify theology
	Philosophy	Apologetics confronts all philosophy Christians should oppose, not develop, philosophy
	Science	Science neither supports nor undermines faith Science and theology ask different questions Typically theistic evolutionism
	History	Christ objectively revealed in Scripture Faith cannot be based on historical knowledge

	Experience	Christianity to be experienced, not defended Experience of faith is self-validating
<i>Apologetics</i>	Scripture	Scripture needs no defense Begin with Christ, not from Scripture as such Scripture gives faithful witness to Christ
	Religions	Christianity is relationship with Christ, not religion Christ unique among religious leaders
	God	All direct theistic proofs are rejected God known in encounter, not in argument
	Evil	Personal problem of evil: How do I trust God? God shows his goodness in Christ's suffering
	Miracles	Miracles are credible to those who know God Miracles are God revealing himself
	Jesus	Jesus is self-attesting Christ witnessed in Scripture Jesus is someone no human could invent

Fideism Illustrated

In this fourth and final dialogue of the book, a Christian named Martina becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while shopping at the mall. The three of them, along with others, have stopped to watch a news bulletin on a television in the department store. The bulletin announces that a lone gunman has killed several people at a local high school. As Martina stands next to Sarah and Murali, the three of them discuss the shocking story.

Murali: How can people do things like this? What's wrong with the world today?

Martina [speaking softly]: I am.

Sarah: Come again?

Martina: I'm sorry. I guess that must have sounded strange. My name's Martina. What's yours?

Sarah: I'm Sarah.

Murali: My name is Murali. What did you mean by saying "I am"?

Martina: I was thinking of G. K. Chesterton's answer to your question. The *London Times* once invited correspondence from readers in answer to that same question, "What's wrong with the world today?" Chesterton wrote a letter in reply that read, "Dear Sirs: I am. Yours respectfully, G. K. Chesterton."

Murali: But what does it mean? Surely he didn't blame himself for all the problems of the world.

Martina: No. But he was saying that the source of all the world's problems was just as much in him, and it is just as much in me, as it was in that teenager who killed all those people.

Murali: And what is that source?

Martina: Sin.

Sarah: Oh, brother. You're saying that the world is a mess because we're all a bunch of sinners?

Martina: Well, yes, we are—myself included. Aren't you?

Sarah: No, I don't consider myself a sinner.

Martina: Why not?

Sarah: Because for there to be sin, there'd have to be a God.

Martina: You're quite right about that.

Sarah: But I don't believe in a God.

Martina: Then how do you explain the sin that is within us all?

Sarah: I just told you, I don't think there is sin in us all. I mean, we're not all like that sicko. I certainly don't have that kind of hatred that would make me want to kill innocent people.

Martina: So you think that for all people to be sinners, sin would have to show itself in the same way in all people?

Sarah: Uh—well, no, that's not what I meant.

Martina: So perhaps sin shows itself in me, or in you, in a different way than the way it shows itself in a mass murderer.

Sarah: I don't think so. I don't think I have any sin in me at all.

Martina: What about the mass murderer? Is there sin in him?

Sarah: No, because nothing is sin unless there's a God.

Martina: Then the fact that you and Murali and I are relatively decent, moral people in comparison to the mass murderers of the world is beside the point. If no one is a sinner, then even the worst of us is not a sinner. And if sin is determined in relation to God, then we might all be sinners in his eyes.

Murali: But why would He consider us sinners, if we're good people?

Martina: Perhaps the two of you are thinking of sin in terms of overtly immoral and even criminal behavior, like stealing and murder. But those kinds of things are only symptoms of sin.

Sarah: What is sin, then?

Martina: There are many ways to define sin, but my favorite way is to say that sin is falling short of embodying God's glorious character—the perfect, infinite love of God. You see, sin is not merely doing forbidden things like stealing, but it's also the failure to do good things like giving generously and sacrificially to others.

Murali: That sounds like a beautiful and noble definition to me. It is a way of challenging us all to strive to be better persons.

Martina: Actually, it's no such thing.

Murali: How can you say that? If we all fall short of this ideal, should we not all strive to come closer to it?

Martina: No. Let me explain. Suppose you were being chased on foot by an army of soldiers bent on killing you, and you came to the edge of a cliff. The only way to safety is to jump half a mile across a canyon to the other side. Could you do it?

Murali: No.

Sarah: No one could.

Martina: Exactly. Would you try?

Murali: I guess not. Oh, I see. You're saying that the love of God is so far beyond our capacity that it is pointless for us to strive to meet that ideal.

Martina: Exactly.

Murali: It seems to me that you're taking this idea rather literally.

Martina: How else should I take it?

Murali: All of the religions of the world employ beautiful myths that inspire us to transcend the normal limitations of our material existence. They all have different ways of saying the same thing: that we must reach beyond ourselves.

Martina: And have you done that?

Murali: Well—I'm trying in my own way, as are we all, are we not?

Martina: But if we're all trying, is that good enough? Remember, you asked what's wrong with the world. Apparently some of us aren't trying, or trying isn't good enough, or both.

Murali: You have a point. I guess I would have to say that some of us aren't trying.

Martina: But why should any of us need to try?

Murali: I don't understand your question.

Martina: Why isn't transcending the normal limitations of our material existence, as you put it, as natural to us as breathing, or eating? If that is what we should all do, why is it so hard—why does it seem to be an unattainable ideal? Or, to return to your question, what's wrong with the world? Why aren't *we* the way *we're* supposed to be?

Murali: That is a very good question. I suppose that is what all of the religions try to explain with their myths.

Martina: And are any of their answers correct?

Murali: I don't think anyone can say that one religion's answer is more correct than that of any other religion. I think every religion is helpful to those who believe it.

Martina: But if we can't say that our religion's answer is correct, then we are admitting that its answer to the question of what is wrong with the world is unreliable. If that's the case, how can the religion be trusted to make things better?

Sarah: That's a good question. I don't think any religion is the answer. I think we need to grow up and stop believing in myths.

Martina: I couldn't agree with you more, Sarah. We shouldn't believe in myths, and religion is not the answer.

Sarah: But I thought you said that our problem was sin. Isn't that a religious concept?

Martina: Yes, indeed. Religion can point out the problem and also point to the true solution. But religion itself is not the solution.

Sarah: Then what is?

Martina: Since we can't solve our sin problem, the only way it could ever be solved is for God to solve it for us. And that's what He did in Jesus Christ.

Sarah: Whoa. I thought you said that the solution wasn't a religion. But Christianity *is* a religion.

Martina: In one sense, you're quite right. If by Christianity you mean the doctrines, rituals, buildings, moral codes, organizations, and so on that together constitute the world religion known as Christianity, then, yes, Christianity is a religion. But in that sense Christianity won't solve the problem any more than any other religion. In fact, as I'm sure you will agree, sometimes Christianity as a religion has made things worse.

Sarah: I'm so glad to hear you say that. I get so tired of Christians thinking that their religion is better than everyone else's religion.

Martina: Actually, I think it is, too.

Murali: There you go again! You seem to delight in contradictions.

Martina: I would prefer to call them paradoxes. They only seem contradictory to us because they challenge our way of thinking about life. You see, I think Christianity is better than other religions for only one reason: God has mercifully used Christianity to point to the true solution that no religion, not even Christianity, can provide.

Murali: And that solution is?

Martina: As I said, that solution is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus becoming a human being and suffering and dying for us on the cross, He overcame sin for us.

Murali: I have always thought of the story of Christ as a wonderful myth, not as literal fact.

Martina: And myths can be wonderful stories. But while the story of Christ makes a wonderful fact, it makes a terrible myth.

Murali: Why do you say that?

Martina: Because the whole point of the story is that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. If that isn't actual fact, then God has not really done anything for us, and we are left in our hopeless state. That's what the apostle Paul meant when he said that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, we are still in our sins and our faith is in vain.

Sarah: But how do you know that it *is* a fact?

Martina: Because God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and by his Spirit He has led me to receive that revelation and to know that it is true.

Sarah: All that tells me is that you've had an experience that convinces you that it's true. That's not an argument that can convince *me*.

Martina: Of course not. You asked me how *I* knew it was true. That's different from asking for an argument that could convince *you*.

Sarah: Do you have such an argument?

Martina: I don't know. I'm not sure that arguments ever convince anyone to put their faith in Christ. That would be like a child asking for a reason to trust her mother.

Sarah: Then why should I believe in Christ?

Martina: Well, Sarah, the best way I know to learn to trust someone is to get to know that person. You can get acquainted with Jesus by reading the Bible, especially the Gospels. Have you read the Gospels?

Sarah: Yes, as a child I heard all the stories about Jesus, and in college I took a course on the Bible. We learned about the origins of the Gospels—that they probably weren't written by Matthew, Mark, and so on, and how they were composed from earlier sources like "Q."

Martina: Oh, my, that's not what I meant. Reading the Gospels as ancient documents to be analyzed and dissected may be a legitimate activity in its own right, but you'll never come to faith in that way. That would be like performing literary source criticism on a love letter in order to get to know your beloved better. No, you need to read the Gospels as a way of getting to know Jesus. Listen to what He says. Look at how He handles various situations. Ask yourself, is this someone I can trust? Is this someone who perfectly embodies the love of God? That's the way you need to read the Gospels.

Sarah: So, what you're saying is that we should believe in Jesus because the Bible says so. You're saying that we should just accept whatever is in the Bible.

Martina: Not at all. I do not believe in Jesus because I believe in the Bible. I believe the Bible because, as I read it, I find Jesus there. I believe the Bible because it speaks to me about Jesus and produces within me a confidence in Jesus and a love for Jesus that cannot be explained away. I believe the Bible because, as I read it, I realize that what it says about Jesus could never have been made up by human beings.

Murali: I have never heard the Bible explained in this way before. I have always found Jesus to be an intriguing figure. I think I will try to read the Gospels and see if what you say is true.

Martina: That's wonderful.

Sarah: I don't know if I buy any of this, but you've given me something to think about.

Martina: That's a start!

Strengths of Fideism

Fideism has some surprising strengths as an approach to apologetics, which we may summarize here.

THE PERSONAL FACTOR

Fideism rightly and helpfully emphasizes the personal dimensions of apologetics. God is a personal being, and apologetics should be done in a manner that respects that fact. Too often God is treated as an intellectual construct rather than a real person. God's revelation is ultimately and primarily a revelation of God himself, in which his purpose is to make himself known to us. Moreover, the purpose of apologetics is to persuade people, and they are persons, too, with problems and needs. Answers to unbelievers' objections that overlook the personal stake they have in the questions are likely to have little or no impact.

HUMBLE VIEW OF HUMAN REASON

Fideism takes very seriously the limitations of human reason and knowledge. The goal of constructing a systematic, comprehensive view of reality that is stated or implied in many works of Christian philosophy, apologetics, and theology suggests a kind of intellectual pride. Fideists rightly criticize an excessive reliance on powers of human reasoning and the acquisition of factual knowledge. Our problem is not that we lack intelligence or information, but that we lack the courage and honesty to accept the truth.

CENTERED ON CHRIST

Fideism centers the Christian witness in apologetics where it should be—on the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ we have God’s answer to our ignorance of God and to the problem of evil and suffering. Our mission is to call people to faith in Christ, not in the Christian religion, not in a Christian philosophy, and not in a system of Christian theology. Moreover, fideists are right in insisting that what unbelievers need most is simply exposure to the power of the person of Jesus Christ. As people read the New Testament, they do encounter Christ as the personal, gracious, and formidable God that He is. Apologetics certainly needs to retain this Christ-centered approach.

Weaknesses of Fideism

We have had occasion throughout our discussion of fideism to dispel some of the most common misconceptions about the fideist position. Three points bear repeating before we identify some of the weaknesses in this approach to apologetics.

First, fideism is not an inherently irrationalist position. It is not irrational to claim that human reason is incapable of constructing a logically coherent account of such mysteries as the Trinity and the Incarnation. It is not irrational to use reason to show that reason has its limits in matters of faith.

Second, fideism is not pure subjectivism. That is, fideism does not deny objective reality or the objective character of God’s revelation. This is a point repeatedly emphasized by such fideists as Karl Barth and Donald Bloesch, but it also applies to Kierkegaard, who asked, “Is there, then, nothing objective in Christianity or is Christianity not the object of objective knowledge? Indeed, why not? The objective is what he is saying, he, the authority” (*JP* 187, 1:75). Various evangelical scholars, including some leading apologists, agree that Kierkegaard

was not a relativist. For example, Douglas Groothuis, who teaches philosophy and apologetics at Denver Seminary, points out that Kierkegaard “took the idea of ‘truth as true for him’ to mean what engaged him at the deepest levels of his heart, not in the sense that he could customize truth to fit his whims.”¹ Fideists argue that the objective dimension of revelation must be united with the subjective dimension of the work of the Spirit within us if that revelation is to be seen for what it is.

Third, fideism is not opposed to all apologetics. Fideists often speak as if it were, but in fact fideists practice a kind of indirect apologetics of their own. Apologetics can be defined as the practice of giving reasoned answers to questions people ask about the truth of Christianity. On the basis of that definition, fideism is clearly a form of apologetics.

Fideism does have some serious weaknesses, though, which should also be noted. And here we do not speak of these weaknesses as merely ‘potential,’ as we did for the other three approaches, since these weaknesses do seem to be endemic if not intrinsic to fideism. Our focus here will be on weaknesses common to fideism, not on the theological problems or apologetic deficiencies associated with individual thinkers. So, for example, although we are critical of various aspects of Karl Barth’s theology, the weaknesses identified here are those that characterize most fideists in modern times, including Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bloesch.

UNDERVALUES PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Fideists routinely pit the personal kind of knowledge against the propositional kind. But there is no reason or need to do this. Propositional knowledge about God is a poor *substitute* for personal knowledge of God, but it can be a good *vehicle* to such personal knowledge. Indeed, propositional knowledge about God is given to us in Scripture.

Moreover, the fideist depreciation of propositional knowledge seriously compromises the apologetic task. Non-Christians have factual questions about the Christian faith, and these often are fair and important questions that need to be answered on the level that they are asked.

Now, we see no reason why a rational fideism of the sort discussed, for example, by C. Stephen Evans, *must* necessarily depreciate propositional knowledge. The fideist is right in saying that saving knowledge of God is personal knowledge—the knowledge of a person whom we love—and not mere knowledge of factual statements or propositions. But the one does not exclude the other. Still, modern fideists so commonly deny or diminish the possibility and value of propositional knowledge about God that we must recognize their doing so as a real weakness of the fideist approach.

OVERSTATED CRITICISM OF REASON AND KNOWLEDGE

As we have said, fideists are right to point out the severe limitations of human reasoning powers and human knowledge. Unfortunately, they typically overstate these criticisms. As a result, fideism underestimates the role that reason and knowledge commonly play in people coming to faith. Scripture uses various kinds of arguments and appeals to factual knowledge to challenge unbelief and to encourage faith. It is true that we cannot expect to resolve all intellectual problems raised against Christianity, but we can resolve many of them adequately. It is also true that we cannot produce definitive, absolute proof for Christianity that will be fully convincing to all people, but that is never what Christian apologists have claimed to be doing. In short, fideist objections to apologetics as traditionally conceived are based on misunderstandings or missteps in reasoning.

Again, much of what fideists say is salutary and does not require such overstated criticisms of apologetics. It ought to be possible to take a humble view of human reason and knowledge without denying their validity and importance. Indeed, some fideists have themselves been extremely sharp thinkers and impressively knowledgeable.

UNNECESSARILY CRITICAL VIEW OF THE BIBLE

Fideism tends, unnecessarily, to undermine confidence in the Bible. Fideists are generally too quick to accept the theories of liberal biblical criticism or other fields of knowledge that seem to call into question the accuracy of the Bible. It is not necessary to depreciate the Bible in order to exalt Christ. Advocating belief in biblical inerrancy is not necessarily rationalistic, since inerrantists freely admit our inability to resolve all apparent difficulties in the Bible.

The following table summarizes the major notable strengths and widespread weaknesses in the fideist approach to apologetics.

Fideism	
<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
Emphasizes the personal dimension of God and his revelation	Pits the personal against the propositional
Takes seriously the limitations of human reason and knowledge	Underestimates the role of reason and knowledge in faith
Centers the Christian witness in apologetics on Christ	Unnecessarily undermines confidence in the Bible

Conclusion

Fideism is in some ways a powerful and insightful approach that comes to age-old apologetic issues in a fresh and often surprising way. However, it also has some serious weaknesses that undermine the apologetic task considerably. We have argued that the insights of fideism can be incorporated into apologetics. It is clear, though, that a full-bodied apologetic will have to draw from one or more of the other approaches as well.

For Further Study

Evans, C. Stephen. *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account*. Reason & Religion. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Discusses the fideism of Pascal, Kant, Kierkegaard, Barth, and others, with suggestions for applying fideism in apologetics.

¹Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 11.