

Part One

What Is Apologetics?

Defining Apologetics

Apologetics may be simply defined as the defense of the Christian faith. The simplicity of this definition, however, masks the complexity of the problem of defining apologetics. It turns out that a diversity of approaches has been taken to defining the meaning, scope, and purpose of apologetics.

From *Apologia* to Apologetics

The word “apologetics” derives from the Greek word *apologia*, which was originally used of a speech of defense or an answer given in reply. In ancient Athens it referred to a defense made in the courtroom as part of the normal judicial procedure. After the accusation, the defendant was allowed to refute the charges with a defense or reply (*apologia*). The accused would attempt to “speak away” (*apo*—away, *logia*—speech) the accusation.¹ The classic example of such an *apologia* was Socrates’ defense against the charge of preaching strange gods, a defense retold by his most famous pupil, Plato, in a dialogue called *The Apology* (in Greek, *hē apologia*).

The word appears 17 times in noun or verb form in the New Testament, and both the noun (*apologia*) and verb form (*apologeomai*) can be translated “defense” or “vindication” in every case.² Usually the word is used to refer to a speech made in one’s own defense. For

example, in one passage Luke says that a Jew named Alexander tried to “make a defense” before an angry crowd in Ephesus that was incited by idol-makers whose business was threatened by Paul’s preaching (Acts 19:33). Elsewhere Luke always uses the word in reference to situations in which Christians, and in particular the apostle Paul, are put on trial for proclaiming their faith in Christ and have to defend their message against the charge of being unlawful (Luke 12:11; 21:14; Acts 22:1; 24:10; 25:8, 16; 26:2, 24).

Paul himself used the word in a variety of contexts in his epistles. To the Corinthians, he found it necessary to “defend” himself against criticisms of his claim to be an apostle (1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Cor. 12:19). At one point he describes the repentance exhibited by the Corinthians as a “vindication” (2 Cor. 7:11 NASB), that is, as an “eagerness to clear yourselves” (NIV, NRSV). To the Romans, Paul described Gentiles who did not have the written Law as being aware enough of God’s Law that, depending on their behavior, their own thoughts will either prosecute or “defend” them on Judgment Day (Rom. 2:15). Toward the end of his life, Paul told Timothy, “At my first *defense* no one supported me” (2 Tim. 4:16), referring to the first time he stood trial. Paul’s usage here is similar to what we find in Luke’s writings. Earlier, he had expressed appreciation to the Philippians for supporting him “both in my imprisonment and in the *defense* and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7). Here again the context is Paul’s conflict with the government and his imprisonment. However, the focus of the “defense” is not Paul but “the gospel”: Paul’s ministry includes defending the gospel against its detractors, especially those who claim that it is subversive or in any way unlawful. So Paul says later in the same chapter, “I am appointed for the *defense* of the gospel” (Phil. 1:16).

Finally, in 1 Peter 3:15 believers are told always to be prepared “to make a *defense* to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.” The context here is

similar to Paul's later epistles and to Luke's writings: non-Christians are slandering the behavior of Christians and threatening them with persecution (1 Pet. 3:13-17; 4:12-19). When challenged or even threatened, Christians are to behave lawfully, maintain a good conscience, and give a reasoned defense of what they believe to anyone who asks. (We will discuss this text further in chapter 2.)

The New Testament, then, does not use the words *apologia* and *apologeomai* in the technical sense of the modern word *apologetics*. The idea of offering a reasoned defense of the faith is evident in three of these texts (Philippians 1:7, 16; and especially 1 Peter 3:15), but even here no science or formal academic discipline of apologetics is contemplated. Indeed, no specific system or theory of apologetics is outlined in the New Testament.

In the second century this general word for "defense" began taking on a narrower sense to refer to a group of writers who defended the beliefs and practices of Christianity against various attacks. These men were known as the *apologists* because of the titles of some of their treatises, and included most notably Justin Martyr (*First Apology*, *Dialogue with Trypho*, *Second Apology*) and Tertullian (*Apologeticum*). The use of the title *Apology* by these authors harks back to Plato's *Apology* and to the word's usual sense in the New Testament, and is consistent with the fact that the emphasis of these second-century apologies was on defending Christians against charges of illegal activities.

It was apparently not until 1794 that *apologetics* was used to designate a specific theological discipline,³ and there has been debate about the place of this discipline in Christian thought almost from that time forward. In 1908 B. B. Warfield cataloged some of these alternate perceptions before offering his own conclusion that apologetics should be given the broad task of authenticating the facts of God (philosophical apologetics), religious consciousness

(psychological apologetics), revelation (revelational apologetics), Christianity (historical apologetics), and the Bible (bibliological apologetics, Warfield's specialty).⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen summarizes Warfield's catalog:

Some attempted to distinguish apologetics from apology, but they differed among themselves respecting the principle of distinction (Dusterdieck, Kubel). Apologetics was variously classified as an exegetical discipline (Planck), historical theology (Tzschirner), theory of religion (Rabiger), philosophical theology (Schleiermacher), something distinct from polemics (Kuyper), something belonging to several departments (Tholuck, Cave), or something which had no right to exist (Nosselt). H. B. Smith viewed apologetics as historico-philosophical dogmatics which deals with *detail* questions, but Kubel claimed that it properly deals only with the *essence* of Christianity. Schultz went further and said that apologetics is concerned simply to defend a generally *religious* view of the world, but others taught that apologetics should aim to establish *Christianity* as the final religion (Sack, Ebrard, Lechler, Lemme).⁵

This debate has continued throughout the twentieth century. In this chapter we will offer definitions of the apologetics word group and consider just how best to conceive of the discipline of apologetics.

Apologetics and Related Terms

It has become customary to use the term **apology** to refer to a specific effort or work in defense of the faith.⁶ An apology might be a written document, a speech, or even a film; any medium of communication might conceivably be used.

An **apologist** is someone who presents an apology or makes a practice of defending the faith. Apologists might (and do) develop their apologies within various intellectual contexts. That is, they may offer defenses of the Christian faith in relation to scientific, historical, philosophical, ethical, religious, theological, or cultural issues.

The terms *apologetic* and *apologetics* are closely related, and can be used synonymously. Here, for clarity's sake, we will suggest one way of usefully distinguishing these terms that corresponds to the way they are often actually used. An **apologetic** (using the word as a noun) will be here defined as a particular approach to the defense of the faith. Thus, one may hear about Francis Schaeffer's apologetic or about the Thomistic apologetic. Of course, we often use *apologetic* as an adjective, as when we speak about apologetic issues or William Paley's apologetic thought.

Apologetics, on the other hand, has been used in at least three ways. Perhaps most commonly it refers to the discipline concerned with the defense of the faith. Second, it can refer to a general grouping of approaches or systems developed for defending the faith, as when we speak about evidentialist apologetics or Reformed apologetics. Third, it is sometimes used to refer to the practice of defending the faith—as the activity of presenting an apology or apologies in defense of the faith. These three usages are easily distinguished by context, so we will employ all three in this book.

Finally, **metapologetics** refers to the study of the nature and methods of apologetics. This term has come into usage only recently and is still rarely used.⁷ Mark Hanna defined it as “the field of inquiry that examines the methods, concepts, and foundations of apologetic systems and perspectives.”⁸ While apologetics studies the defense of the faith, metapologetics studies the theoretical issues underlying the defense of the faith. It is evident, then, that metapologetics is a

branch of apologetics; it focuses on the principal, fundamental questions that must be answered properly if the practice of apologetics is to be securely grounded in truth. A **metapologetic** may then be defined as a particular theory of metapologetics, such as Cornelius Van Til's Reformed metapologetic or Norman Geisler's neo-Thomistic metapologetic.

The Functions of Apologetics

Historically, apologetics has been understood to involve at least three functions or goals. Some apologists have emphasized only one function while others have denied that one or more of these are valid functions of apologetics, but in general they have been widely recognized as defining the task of apologetics. Francis Beattie, for example, delineated them as a *defense* of Christianity as a system, a *vindication* of the Christian worldview against its assailants, and a *refutation* of opposing systems and theories.⁹

Bernard Ramm also lists three functions of apologetics. The first is “to show how the Christian faith is related to truth claims.” The truth claims of a religion must be examined so that its relation to reality can be discerned and tested. This function corresponds to what Beattie calls defense. The second function is “to show Christianity’s power of interpretation” relative to a variety of subjects—which is essentially the same as what Beattie calls vindication. Ramm’s third function, the refutation of false or spurious attacks, is identical to Beattie’s.¹⁰

John Frame likewise has outlined “three aspects of apologetics,” which he calls proof, defense, and offense. Proof involves “presenting a rational basis for faith”; defense involves “answering the objections of unbelief”; and offense means “attacking the foolishness (Ps. 14:1; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16) of unbelieving thought.”¹¹ Frame’s book then follows this outline: proof (chapters 3–5), defense (6–7), and offense (8).

The first three parts of Robert Reymond's fourfold analysis of the task of Christian apologetics follow the same pattern. (1) Apologetics answers particular objections—obstacles like alleged contradictions between scriptural statements and misconceptions about Christianity need to be removed (defense). (2) It gives an account of the foundations of the Christian faith by delving into philosophical theology, and especially epistemology (vindication). (3) It challenges non-Christian systems, particularly in the area of epistemological justification (refutation). To these Reymond adds a fourth point: (4) Apologetics seeks to persuade people of the truth of the Christian position.¹² In a sense, this last point could be viewed simply as indicating the overall purpose of apologetics, with the first three points addressing the specific functions by which that purpose is accomplished. On the other hand, treating persuasion as a separate function is helpful, since it involves elements that go beyond offering an intellectual response (the focus of the first three points). Persuasion must also consider the life experience of the unbeliever, the proper tone to take with a person, and other matters beyond simply imparting information.

We may distinguish, then, four functions, goals, modes, or aspects of apologetics. The first may be called *vindication* (Beattie) or *proof* (Frame) and involves marshaling philosophical arguments as well as scientific and historical evidences for the Christian faith. The goal of apologetics here is to develop a positive case for Christianity as a belief system that should be accepted. Philosophically, this means drawing out the logical implications of the Christian worldview so that they can be clearly seen and contrasted with alternate worldviews. Such a contrast necessarily raises the issue of criteria of verification if these competing truth claims are to be assessed. The question of the criteria by which Christianity is proved is a fundamental point of contention among proponents of the various kinds of Christian apologetic systems.

The second function is *defense*. This function is closest to the New Testament and early Christian use of the word *apologia*: defending Christianity against the plethora of attacks made against it in every generation by critics of varying belief systems. This function involves clarifying the Christian position in light of misunderstandings and misrepresentations; answering objections, criticisms, or questions from non-Christians; and in general clearing away any intellectual difficulties that nonbelievers claim stand in the way of their coming to faith. More generally, the purpose of apologetics as defense is not so much to show that Christianity is true as to show that it is *credible*.

The third function is *refutation* of opposing beliefs (what Frame calls “offense”). This function focuses on answering, not specific objections to Christianity, but the arguments non-Christians give in support of their own beliefs. Most apologists agree that refutation cannot stand alone, since proving a non-Christian religion or philosophy to be false does not prove that Christianity is true. Nevertheless, it is an essential function of apologetics.

The fourth function is *persuasion*. By this we do not mean merely convincing people that Christianity is true, but persuading them to apply its truth to their life. This function focuses on bringing non-Christians to the point of commitment. The apologist’s intent is not merely to win an intellectual argument, but to persuade people to commit their lives and eternal futures into the trust of the Son of God who died for them. We might also speak of this function as evangelism or *witness*.

These four aspects or functions of apologetics have differing and complementary goals or intentions with respect to reason. Apologetics as proof shows that *Christianity is reasonable*; its purpose is to give the non-Christian good reasons to embrace the Christian faith. Apologetics as defense shows that *Christianity is not unreasonable*; its purpose is to show that the non-Christian

will not be acting irrationally by trusting in Christ or by accepting the Bible as God's word. Third, apologetics as refutation shows that *non-Christian thought is unreasonable*. The purpose of refuting non-Christian belief systems is to confront non-Christians with the irrationality of their position. And fourth, apologetics as persuasion takes into consideration the fact that *Christianity is not known by reason alone*. The apologist seeks to persuade non-Christians to trust Christ, not merely to accept truth claims about Christ, and this purpose necessitates realizing the personal dimension in apologetic encounters and in every conversion to faith in Christ.

Not everyone agrees that apologetics involves all four of these functions. For example, some apologists and theologians have claimed that proof is not a valid function of apologetics—that we should be content to show that Christianity is not unreasonable. Or again, some Christian philosophers have urged against trying to argue that the non-Christian is being irrational to reject Christianity. Many apologists have even abandoned the idea that apologetics might be useful to persuade people to believe in Christ. Such opinions notwithstanding, all four functions have historically been important in apologetics, and each has been championed by great Christian apologists throughout church history.¹³ It is to the efforts of those apologists, then, that we turn in the next chapter.

For Further Study

Howe, Frederic R. *Challenge and Response: A Handbook for Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982. The first two chapters discuss the definition of apologetics (13-24) and the relationship between evangelism and apologetics (25-33), with Howe arguing for a sharp distinction between the two.

Mayers, Ronald B. “What Is Apologetics?” Chapter 1 in *Balanced Apologetics: Using Evidences and Presuppositions in Defense of the Faith*, 1-14. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996. First published as *Both/And: A Balanced Apologetic*. Chicago: Moody, 1984. Helpful treatment of the meaning of *apologia* and of the relationship between apologetics and philosophy.

Warfield, Benjamin B. “Apologetics.” In *The New Schaff-Hertzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, 1:232-238. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908. Reprinted in *Studies in Theology*, 3-21. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* 9. New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981. Still hard-to-match analysis of the nature of apologetics and its place in the academic disciplines.

¹Martin Batts, “A Summary and Critique of the Historical Apologetic of John Warwick Montgomery” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), 1.

²Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the “Updated Edition” of the New American Standard Bible, or NASB (La Habra, Calif.: Lockman Foundation, 1995; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). Other translations cited include the New International Version (NIV) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³Greg L. Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House, 1976), 191.

⁴Benjamin B. Warfield, “Apologetics,” in *Studies in Theology*, The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, vol. 9 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3-21.

⁵Bahnsen, “Socrates or Christ,” 193.

⁶E.g., A. B. Bruce, *Apologetics; or, Christianity Defensively Stated*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 33-34; “Glossary of Technical Terms,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:51.

⁷The first occurrence of the term known to us is in John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), xiii (which uses the form “meta-apologetics”).

⁸Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 94.

⁹Francis R. Beattie, *Apologetics; or, The Rational Vindication of Christianity* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1903), 1:56.

¹⁰Bernard Ramm, *A Christian Appeal to Reason* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1972), 15-19.

¹¹John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 2.

¹²Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge: An Introductory Study in Christian Apologetic Methodology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 5-7.

¹³In the first edition of this book, we had correlated these four functions of proof, defense, refutation, and persuasion with the four basic approaches of classical, evidential, Reformed, and fideistic apologetics. Although some rough correlations can be made (e.g., refutation is primary in the presuppositionalist wing of Reformed apologetics; persuasion clearly is primary in fideism), they do not hold up consistently.