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Speaking the Truth in Love: Perspectives on Apologetics

Integrating the different approaches is not merely a matter of comparing the arguments and looking for ways of harmonizing them. While we have suggested a holistic way of looking at the four approaches, we have also emphasized that we are not proposing a “new approach” or a comprehensive system that definitively unites them. Indeed, we doubt that this is possible or even desirable. In this final chapter we suggest some reasons why the diversity of apologetic approaches is unavoidable and may actually be a good thing.

One Body, Many Gifts:

How Apologists Differ

It is too easy to assert that some people are gifted to be apologists and others are not. While true, this observation is one-sided and does not go to the heart of the issue. Some Christians are indeed gifted and called by God to an ongoing and formal ministry of apologetics. But in a sense, all Christians are called to participate in this ministry. In Philippians, for example, the apostle Paul can say both that he was “appointed for the defense of the gospel” (Philippians 1:16) and that the Philippian Christians supported and shared with him “in the

defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7). The apostle Peter instructed the whole church scattered throughout the region to be “always . . . ready to make a defense” to those who asked for the reason for their hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

When Christians think about having different gifts, they often consider the overtly supernatural gifts that Paul discussed in 1 Corinthians 12–14. However, those chapters are notable by their exceptional nature and by the fact that Paul’s focus was on correcting abuse and downplaying the importance of such gifts. While God does work in overtly supernatural ways among Christians as the Holy Spirit wills (1 Corinthians 12:11), the primary and regular way God gifts his people was and is not overtly supernatural. Instead, God’s main ministry gifts to the church are the Spirit-motivated and Spirit-enhanced use of natural abilities that are sanctified and consecrated to God’s service through faith. The apostles themselves are noteworthy examples: Peter was already an adventurous, outspoken man before Pentecost, and thus a natural leader. Paul was a sophisticated rabbinical student knowledgeable in Scripture and the Greek culture, and so brought considerable natural gifts, training, and experience to his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Consider Paul’s list of gifts given by God to the members of Christ’s body, the church, in Romans 12: prophecy, serving, teaching, exhorting (or encouraging), giving, leading, and showing mercy (verses 6-8). Most (possibly all) of these gifts are not abilities that some individuals have in abundance and others have not at all. They are functions that all Christians are expected to exercise according to their ability, recognizing that some people are exceptionally gifted in one and other people in another. (Prophecy may be the one exception; we leave this question to the side here.) Certainly, all Christians are expected to serve one another (Galatians 5:13), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13), give to one

another (Acts 20:35), and be merciful to one another (Matthew 5:7; James 3:17). Most adult Christians find themselves in positions where they must lead and teach, whether children or younger men and women, or in other places of responsibility (cf. Ephesians 6:4; Titus 2:2-3). Yet some believers will be especially gifted for each of these normal functions of the Christian life.

Just as there are different gifts, there are different kinds of apologists. The two most basic kinds, in terms of regular ministries needing support from the church, are evangelists and teachers (cf. Ephesians 4:11). Some apologists are evangelist-apologists whose ministry is directed primarily to people *outside* the church, while others are teacher-apologists whose ministry is directed primarily to people *inside* the church. The former naturally and properly tend to use arguments that are persuasive to unbelievers, while the latter just as properly tend toward arguments that build on assumptions commonly taken for granted by the Christians they are teaching. Of course, all apologists engage in some evangelism and some teaching; we are talking about emphases and special callings.

Regarding the gifted functions in Romans 12, Christians have different strengths in which they can best use their apologetics. Some are most effective when encouraging others using apologetic insights. Some are effective in imparting apologetic concepts to others in a formal instructional setting (that is, teaching). Some are gifted to organize and lead others in the practice of apologetics.

There are other ways Christians engaged in apologetics differ from one another. But these differences can also be found among non-Christians. We will now consider these differences.

One World, Many Individuals:

How People Differ

Human beings differ from each another in myriad ways. They come from different parts of the world, speak different languages, are taught in different educational systems. They grow up listening to different songs, reading different books, meeting different people. Apologists will tend to gravitate toward certain approaches because of their background and experience. It is no accident that evangelical scientists tend to be evidentialists or that evangelical artists tend to be fideists. Of course, such observations are generalizations, but they do point up factors that Christians engaged in apologetics need to consider. Thoughtful apologists will want to think about the factors that might influence their preference of one approach over another, other than the specific arguments they think warrant that approach.

In addition, apologists should use common sense and try to match their apologetic to the person with whom they are speaking. Technical distinctions that are important in the academic study of apologetics usually have no place in presenting apologetics to one's neighbor, schoolmate, co-worker, or family member. Someone with a scientific bent who wants empirically based evidence should be offered such evidence, even while being told that empirical facts alone cannot settle questions about God. Someone who is clearly struggling emotionally due to personal experiences should usually not be met with the cosmological or transcendental argument (though words of comfort might implicitly make points similar to those defended with those arguments).

Much attention has been given during the past half-century or so to analyzing the differences in attitude, aptitude, and related basic personality characteristics among people.

Since psychology is still very much in its infancy, these studies should be regarded as suggestive, not settled fact. Still, they offer interesting and significant insights into the differences among Christian apologists.

In *Conformed to His Image*, one of us (Ken Boa) explained how the natural differences in people's spiritual, psychological, and physical inclinations provide some insight into why Christians gravitate toward different approaches to spirituality. For example, Christians tend to place a premium on theological renewal, personal renewal, social transformation, or inner transformation. An excessive focus on one of these four aspects of the Christian life results in rationalism, pietism, moralism, or quietism respectively.¹

One Process, Many Stages: How Apologetic Needs Differ

One of the main reasons apologists often suppose that there is only one right approach is the assumption that an apologetic must move, or at least point, a person from rank unbelief to sound belief. The standard paradigm apologetic encounter is that of a Christian trying to convince an avowed atheist that the absolute truth is that God exists, is triune, views human beings as sinners deserving judgment, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, redeemed us from our sins, and inspired an inerrant Bible. This is a tall order, and the notion that an apologetic is invalid if it does not meet this standard is enough to discourage all but the extremely confident.

The validity of the apologetic does not depend on its success, but on its utility in facilitating success through the hidden illuminating work of the Holy Spirit within non-Christians. On this premise, we favor the view that an apologetic is valid and valuable if it

provides the basis for a non-Christian moving at all closer to embracing the Christian faith. People are indeed either dead in sins or born again, lost or found, unjustified or justified. But they may be closer or further away from crossing over from life to death, depending on what they believe or do not believe. People are typically not standing still: they are generally either moving toward faith or toward unbelief. A person who did not believe that a God exists but has now accepted that fact through hearing an apologetic argument has moved in the right direction. (Of course, factors other than what a person believes can affect the direction he is moving, but those fall outside the province of apologetics.)

It may be, then, that some apologetic approaches are more useful at certain points along the spectrum than at others.

Common Questions from Unbelief to Faith	Possible Apologetic Arguments
It doesn't matter to me if God exists or not.	Pascal's Wager: If God exists, it matters! (F)
God may be real to you, but he's not to me.	Is Jesus real enough for you? (F) You live every day as if God exists. (R)
How do you know there is a God?	Without God, there is no meaning. (R) No other worldview makes sense. (C) There are many lines of evidence. (E)
The stories in the Bible are hard to believe.	If God exists, nothing is too hard for him. (C)
Why must we believe in the God of the Bible?	God fulfilled prophecy and did miracles. (E)
How do we know Jesus rose from the dead?	The tomb was empty and people saw Jesus. (E)
Wasn't Jesus just a great prophet?	Great prophets don't claim to be God. (C)
Why is Christianity alone the truth?	The God of Christianity is the only true God. (R) Christ is the truth; Christianity points to him. (F)
I'd like to believe, but I'm not sure.	Read the Gospels and get to know Jesus. (F)
<i>C: Classical; E: Evidential; F: Fideist; R: Reformed</i>	

Thus, speaking very broadly and generally, we would suggest that elements of the fideist approach are most valuable at the extreme ends of the process of a person moving intellectually from unbelief to faith. This is because fideism is strongest in dealing with the personal or

volitional dimension of apologetic questions. The Reformed approach is strongest in exposing the irrationality of unbelief (vital early in the process) and affirming the exclusivity of the Christian truth claims (vital near the end of the process). The classical and evidential approaches are strongest in defending specific truth claims that tend to be questioned in the middle of the process.

Stages Toward Faith	Dominant Approaches
Disinterested/ignorant	Fideism
Skeptical	Reformed apologetics
Confused	Classical apologetics
Has specific objections	Evidentialism
Has general objections	Classical apologetics
Is checking for a way out	Reformed apologetics
Has lingering doubts	Fideism

Of course, we are not suggesting that unbelievers always pass through this entire process before becoming convinced. Nor are we claiming that the different approaches only have utility at the stages indicated. We simply want to suggest that the different approaches have been developed at least partly because they tend to be more potent at different stages of a non-Christian's movement toward conviction. Moreover, as we argued in the preceding two chapters, each of the four approaches can be broadened to include elements of the other approaches.

One Faith, Many Questions:

How Apologetic Problems Differ

We have already seen that apologetics deals with a variety of questions and suggested that different approaches are more effective with certain kinds of questions than others. This is

true even when on a superficial level the questions seem to be on the same subject. We saw in the last chapter that the so-called problem of evil actually includes four distinct problems that are characteristically and most effectively addressed by the four different apologetic approaches (the deductive, inductive, theological, and existential problems of evil). Non-Christians can ask if a claim makes sense (for example, “Are miracles possible?”), what evidence supports it (“How do we know it happened?”), what it proves about God (“How do we know that God did it?”), or why it is significant for us (“Why does it matter to me if it happened?”). These questions correspond to the classical, evidentialist, Reformed, and fideist approaches respectively.

Approach	Typical Question	The Point	Apologetic Argument
Classical	“Are miracles possible?”	What it means	Miracles are coherent in a theistic worldview.
Evidential	“How do we know it happened?”	Why it’s true	The crucial biblical miracles are well attested facts.
Reformed	“How do we know that God did it?”	What it proves	The miracles are found in God’s authoritative word.
Fideist	“Why does it matter to me?”	Why it matters	The miracles show that God cares and that we need faith.

Many apologists already address more than one of these questions. For example, a classical apologist views the first question as relevant in the first step of a classical apologetic (establishing theism) and the second question as relevant in the second step (providing evidence for Christianity as the true theism). Both classical and evidentialist apologists view the third question as answered at the end of the apologetic argument (when the inspiration of Scripture is concluded from the testimony of the miraculously vindicated Jesus Christ). Reformed apologists can and do answer the first question in essentially the same way as a classical apologist would. All apologists can address the fourth question and would give essentially the same answer.

Again, integration is already happening: what we hope to encourage is more deliberate, systematic efforts at integrating the insights and answers of other approaches into one’s apologetic. One of the benefits of doing so is that we will be able to answer a broader range of questions more successfully.

Metapologetics: Four Approaches

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Ground	Reason	Fact	Revelation	Faith
Form	Rational	Empirical	Transcendental	Paradoxical
Perspective	Normative (immanent)	Situational	Normative (transcendent)	Existential
Precursors	Anselm Aquinas	Joseph Butler William Paley	John Calvin Thomas Reid	Martin Luther Søren Kierkegaard
20th Cent. Advocates	C. S. Lewis Norman Geisler	J. W. Montgomery Richard Swinburne	Cornelius Van Til Alvin Plantinga	Karl Barth Donald Bloesch
Gospels	John	Luke	Matthew	Mark
God	God exists	God has acted	God has spoken	God loves me
Knowledge	Internal coherence Faith is reasonable Use rational tests to assess truth claims and to choose a worldview	External coherence Faith is not unreasonable Use sound methods for arriving at truth by discovering and interpreting facts	Fidelity to Scripture Unbelief is unreasonable God, as revealed in Scripture, is foundational for all knowledge of truth	Fidelity to Christ Faith is not known by reason alone Truth about God is found in encounter with Him, not in thinking about Him
Theology	Apologetics as prolegomena Catholics, broadly evangelicals	Apologetics as polemics Evangelical Arminians	Apologetics as part of theology Calvinists, especially Dutch	Apologetics as persuasive theology Lutherans, neoevangelicals
Philosophy	Apologetics uses philosophy’s ideas	Apologetics uses philosophy’s tools	Apologetics confronts false philosophy	Apologetics confronts all philosophy
Science	<i>Consistency model:</i> Show that science properly interpreted is consistent with the Christian faith	<i>Confirmation model:</i> Use science to give factual confirmation of the Christian faith	<i>Conflict model:</i> Show that true science depends on the truth of God’s revelation	<i>Contrast model:</i> Show that science deals with physical matters, faith deals with the personal

	Typically generic creationism	Typically old-earth creationism	Typically young-earth creationism	Typically theistic evolutionism
History	Objective view of history difficult but possible	Objective view of history quite realizable	Objective truth about history given in Scripture	Christ objectively revealed by the Spirit in Scripture
	Right view of history requires right worldview	Right view of history requires right method	Right view of history based on revelation	Faith cannot be based on historical knowledge
Experience	Religious experience not irrational	Religious experience may not be reliable	God's image in man is point of contact	Experience faith, don't defend it
	Test experiences by worldview	Test experiences by facts	Test experiences by Scripture	Experience of faith is self-validating

Apologetics: Four Approaches

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Scripture	Scripture is subject of apologetics Rationally verified authority of God First, theism; second, Christ; third, Scripture as attested by Christ Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration if God exists	Scripture is source of apologetics Factually verified story about Christ First, historicity of Scripture; second, Christ and theism; third, inspiration Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration, which proves God	Scripture is standard of apologetics Self-attesting authority of God First, Scripture's divine claims; second, irrationality of all alternatives Fulfilled prophecy presupposes inspiration	Scripture is story of apologetics Self-attesting story about Christ First and always, Scripture as witness to Christ Fulfilled prophecy is God's advance witness to Christ
Religions	Disprove the worldviews underlying other religions	Present the unique factual, miraculous character of the Christian religion	Present the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian principles	Explain that the Christian faith is not a religion, but a relationship
God	Show that theism is the only or most rational worldview Cosmological, moral arguments most common	Use various lines of argument and evidence to build a case for theism Design argument most common	Show that God's existence is basic or foundational to all knowledge & proof Epistemic argument most common	Explain that knowing God is a relational matter All direct proofs are rejected; argument from paradox used
Evil	Deductive problem	Inductive problem	Theological	Existential problem

	of evil: Is theism inconsistent? Freewill defense: evil result of free choice of creatures	of evil: Is theism likely? Natural theology defense: evidence for God holds up	problem of evil: Is God sovereign over evil? Compatibilist defense: God not direct cause of evil	of evil: Can God be trusted despite evil? <i>Theologia crucis</i> : God shows his goodness in Christ
Miracles	Miracles in general are possible Miracles, credible in theistic worldview, are credentials of special revelation	Specific miracles are probable Miracles provide evidence for theism in the context of biblical history	Biblical miracles are prophetic Biblical miracles are credible to those who accept the Bible's authority	Christ's miracles are paradoxical Miracles, external and internal, are given by God in response to faith
Jesus	Examine alternative views of Jesus to show that none can be rationally held	Detail evidence for Jesus' resurrection, fulfilled prophecies, and the like	Present Jesus' claim to be God as his self-attesting Word confirmed by Spirit	Call people to meet God's love in Jesus Jesus is someone no human could invent

Conclusion

The apostle Paul affirmed that there is “one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). Sometimes Christians allow their differences to obscure the unity that Paul affirmed. The church is one body, but it has many and varied members. We are empowered by one Spirit, but he has gifted us in different ways. We have one hope, but that hope can be articulated in many different ways to persuade others to respond to the Spirit's call to join us in that hope.

In this book we have emphasized the complementary ways in which different approaches to apologetics can be fruitfully related to one another. In doing so, we have sought to represent each approach at its best and in the most sympathetic manner possible. This means that we have often passed over some of the egregious errors and faults that can be found in the apologetic arguments and teaching of the very human, very imperfect apologists whose views we have

discussed. (We hope others will do the same for us!) At the same time, we have drawn attention to some of the most important weaknesses that attend each of the major approaches, along with their perennial strengths. We handled the approaches in this way to underscore the fact that all of us can learn from other approaches.

In presenting an integrative analysis of apologetic systems, there is a real danger that we will be misconstrued as claiming to present yet another approach as the best or most complete approach to apologetics. We have therefore stated repeatedly that we are not advocating a “fifth” approach or proposing a system for definitively integrating all four basic approaches. Nor do we imagine that what we have said here is or should be the last word. We have our own pronounced tendencies and limited points of view, as do all apologists. Some of us are inclined to see issues in terms of *either/or*, emphasizing the dichotomies, the watershed issues, and the unbridgeable differences between points of view. Others of us are inclined to see issues in terms of *both/and*, emphasizing the commonalities, the qualifications to be made on both sides of a debate, the potential for reconciliation between seemingly opposed points of view. We confess to being persons, and apologists, of the latter kind. But we do not claim that our viewpoint in this regard is better—only that it is a needed voice to balance the viewpoints of the either/or temperament. In other words, we apply our “both/and” even to the need for the contributions of both the single-approach polemicists and the multiple-approach integrationists.

There are, after all, issues on which Christians must take a decisive stand for truth and against error, insisting that one is *either* upholding the truth *or* advocating error. Either one affirms that all facts are what they are ultimately because this is God’s world, or one denies that God is the sovereign Lord of creation. Either one affirms that Jesus Christ rose physically from the dead in real space-time history, or one denies this cornerstone truth of the Christian faith.

Either one affirms that the Bible is God's Word, communicating revealed truth just as God willed, or one undermines the church's foundational source for its worship, its practice, its doctrine, and its apologetics. Either one affirms that God is known savingly only in Jesus Christ, or one erroneously encourages people to believe that there is hope for them outside a relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The multiplicity of ways that these truths have and can be defended should not be allowed to obscure the fact that these are the nonnegotiable principles for which all sound Christian apologetics must contend.

For Further Study

Boa, Kenneth D. *That I May Know God: Pathways to Spiritual Formation*. Sisters, Oreg.:

Multnomah, 1998. Applies insights into varying personalities and varying periods of church history to the question of why people follow different approaches to spiritual growth.

¹Kenneth D. Boa, *Conformed to His Image: A Practical Handbook to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), Appendix A.