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Apologetics and the Limits of Reason

In this concluding chapter on classical 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 Classical Apologetics 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 classical apologetics model.

METAPOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Metapologetic questions deal with the assumptions or approaches taken by an apologetic method to the relationship between apologetics and various areas or kinds of knowledge. In chapter 5 we considered the approach taken in classical apologetics to epistemology (the theory of knowledge), 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?

Classical apologetics emphasizes *logic* in its defense of the Christian faith as a form of knowledge. Apologists in this tradition may speak of logic, reason, rationality, coherence, or consistency; these are all different ways of referring to what we might call the “structural integrity” of a belief system. The form of argument given priority in classical apologetics is *deductive* in form. In theory deductive arguments yield certain conclusions, but this is so only if one knows with certainty that the premises are true. Thus, in practice classical apologists do not typically claim absolute certainty for their arguments. They also prefer to apply deductive reasoning in their critiques of non-Christian belief systems and in their rebuttals to objections to Christian beliefs. The most decisive form of criticism in classical apologetics is to show that a non-Christian belief or objection is logically *self-defeating* or self-referentially incoherent. This criticism is applied especially to relativism, both in Eastern religion and philosophy and in the New Age movement and postmodernism. All these movements are regarded as self-refuting and therefore incoherent on their face.

Logical argument in apologetics does not produce faith, nor is it the proper basis of Christian assurance or knowledge; these are the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the purpose of apologetic argument is to serve as means through which the Holy Spirit can lead nonbelievers to acknowledge the truth of Christianity.

2. What is the relationship between apologetics and theology?

Classical apologists typically regard the intellectual discipline of apologetics as in some sense preceding theology. That is, apologetics seeks to defend the basic principles and assumptions of Christian theology—to explain why we ought to believe in the Christian faith as revealed in Scripture and practiced in the Christian church. In this model, apologetic argument

cannot assume or be based on theological positions, because the purpose of apologetics is to convince people to embrace the Christian revelation that is the basis of all theology. For this reason classical apologists see their mission as defending “mere Christianity” and not any specific theological camp within Christianity.

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

Classical apologetics has the most positive view of philosophy in general, and even of non-Christian philosophy, of the four approaches to apologetics. The classical apologist views the apologetic task as articulating the Christian position in a way that communicates that position clearly and faithfully in terms that people of non-Christian worldviews and religions can understand. This does not mean that non-Christian philosophies are accepted without qualification, but that the Christian thinker uses the categories and insights of non-Christian systems of thought in order to make Christian thought intelligible to the non-Christian. Classical apologists tend to see a great deal of overlap in subject matter and method between apologetics and philosophy.

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

Classical apologists take a cautiously positive approach to the findings and theories of science. While not generally suspicious of science, they urge caution in jumping too quickly to endorse scientific theories in fields where theories have historically come and gone. Still, they regard modern developments in science, especially in cosmology, as encouraging confirmation of key aspects of the Christian theistic worldview. Classical apologists of the early twentieth

century tended to accept tentatively the biological theory of evolution, though more recently evangelical classical apologists have tended to embrace some form of old-earth creationism.

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

The main concern that classical apologists have regarding history is to show that true knowledge of the past is possible. They admit that competing worldviews and other factors tend to skew our perceptions of the past. For this reason they typically conclude that an accurate view of history, especially with regard to the significance of past events, requires adherence to a true worldview. In other words, one must have a theistic view of the world and of history to understand the past correctly.

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

Classical apologists do not place heavy emphasis on arguments from experience. However, they do contend that the commonality of religious experience and the virtual universality of the religious impulse prove there is a transcendent reality toward which human beings incorrigibly yearn. What all or nearly all people need must exist in some form; so if people have a need for God, then there must be a God. To deny the existence of the transcendent, one would have to contend that everyone in history who has had a religious experience was totally deceived in thinking he had experienced transcendent reality.

APOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Apologetic questions deal with issues commonly raised by non-Christians themselves. In chapter 6 we considered the approach classical apologetics takes to answering questions about

the Bible, Christianity and other belief systems, 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?

In one sense all Christian apologists urge that the Bible should be believed because it is *true*—indeed, because it is God’s word of truth. But the four apologetic methods approach this question in different ways. Classical apologists commonly reserve it for the end of the apologetic task. Only after the existence of God, the credibility of his intervening in history, and the deity of Jesus Christ have been shown to be true do they seek to establish the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In their view we believe in the Bible because we believe in the God revealed in Christ—not the other way around. Moreover, they are generally frank about saying that reason may be validly used to test and verify the claim of the Bible to be a revelation from God. Doing so does not elevate reason above Scripture; rather, it takes account of the fact that God communicated his revelation to us in a rational form and expects us to recognize and receive it through our faculty of reason.

2. Don’t all religions lead to God?

Classical apologists tend to approach the question of the revelatory character of non-Christian religions by analyzing those religions in terms of their worldviews. By reducing alternative belief systems to a manageable number, the apologist can analyze the basic worldview options and show that theism is the correct one. This reduces the number of viable world religions to three: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Classical apologists then point to

various evidences that Christianity is the true fulfillment of original (Old Testament) Judaism and that both Judaism and Islam fail to reckon adequately with the claims of Christ. But they do not claim there is no truth in non-Christian religions. In fact, they argue that God reveals himself to all people and that all religions reflect that revelation, albeit in partial and corrupt form. In this sense non-Christian religions can be viewed as expressions of hope or longing for the full and redemptive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

3. How do we know that God exists?

Although classical apologists are generally careful to point out that there is no substitute for a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ and the indwelling presence of God by his Holy Spirit, they do maintain that the existence of God can be demonstrated rationally. While most of them do not endorse all the traditional theistic proofs, they all endorse one or more of those arguments in some form. Further, while most are not averse to arguments that appeal to scientific facts or other inductive evidence, the primary form of theistic argument most classical apologists favor is deductive. The most commonly used theistic proofs in the classical tradition are the cosmological argument (which reasons from the world to God), the teleological argument (which reasons from order or design to God), the moral argument (which reasons from moral absolutes to God as the absolute source of morality), and the ontological argument (which reasons from the idea of God to the existence of God).

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

Classical apologists usually address the problem of evil in its historically most influential form as a logical conundrum: How can God be all-powerful and all-loving, yet permit evil? This

seeming contradiction is typically resolved by showing that it is logically necessary, or at least logically possible, for God to permit evil in order for God's loving purpose in creation to be realized. The most common answers focus on the beginning and the end. Evil originated because God created beings with a capacity for choice (the free-will defense). Evil will be overcome both because God will one day eliminate it and because God will bring about a greater good as a result of the evil he has temporarily permitted.

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

Classical apologists defend the coherence of belief in miracles. They attribute modern denials of the biblical miracles to an antsupernatural mind-set that at its root is a product of a nontheistic worldview. Thus miracles must be defended primarily by defending the theistic worldview and showing that they are neither impossible nor implausible given the existence of God.

6. Why should I believe in Jesus?

Classical apologists regard faith in Jesus as the core issue in apologetics. To press the claims of Christ, they urge nonbelievers to choose how they will view Jesus. Nonbelievers are told there are only so many alternatives in light of the Gospels' reports that Jesus claimed to be God. One might say that Jesus made no such claim—but then how did Jews come to believe this about a crucified man? Or one might suggest that he did claim to be God but meant it in the Eastern mystical sense that we are all one with God—but is this doctrine likely to have fallen from the lips of a Jewish rabbi? If one chooses neither of these options, one must believe that Jesus was either wrong about being God or right. If he was wrong, he was either a liar or a

lunatic. If he was right, then he was indeed Lord. The one explanation that can't stand up to the evidence is that Jesus was merely a great teacher.

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

Issue	Position
<i>Metapologetics</i>	Knowledge Logic is the primary test of worldviews Postmodernism is self-refuting Spirit's witness is the ground of knowledge
	Theology Apologetics establishes foundation of theology Apologetics defends "mere Christianity"
	Philosophy Apologetics overlaps philosophy's subject matter Substantive use of non-Christian philosophy
	Science Cautiously accepts established theories Science and theology overlap, both rational Typically old-earth creationism
	History Objective view of history difficult but possible Right view of history requires right worldview
	Experience Religious experience not irrational Argument from religious desire
<i>Apologetics</i>	Scripture Reason used to test Scripture's credentials Begin with theism, conclude with inspiration Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration if God exists
	Religions Religious pluralism is illogical Nontheistic worldviews are incoherent
	God Generally deductive proofs favored Cosmological, moral arguments most common
	Evil Deductive problem of evil: Is theism inconsistent? Beginning: evil result of free choice of creatures End: world with evil best way to best world
	Miracles Miracles credible given a theistic worldview Miracles do not contradict natural law
	Jesus Jesus' claim to deity excludes him as mere man Quintilemma: Legend, lama, liar, lunatic, Lord?

Classical Apologetics Illustrated

In this first of four dialogues we will present in this book, a Christian named Tom becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while waiting in line to see a movie. Tom is a computer programmer. He has read widely in philosophy and apologetics; his favorite author is C. S. Lewis. In fact, he has brought a copy of Lewis's *Problem of Pain* with him to read while waiting to see the movie. Sarah notices the book and asks him about it:

Sarah: That book sounds interesting. What's it about?

Tom: It's about the question of why there is pain and death in the world if the world was made by an all-powerful and all-loving God.

Sarah: That seems like an obvious contradiction to me.

Tom: Yes, I know it seems like one. But I think it's only an apparent contradiction, not a real one. I think a good answer can be given that will resolve the problem.

Murali: Excuse me, may I say something? This question is of interest to me as well.

Tom: Sure. By the way, my name's Tom. What's yours?

Murali: Murali. I am from India.

Sarah: My name's Sarah. Nice to meet you guys.

Tom: Likewise. Murali, you were going to say something?

Murali: Yes. You said you thought there was a good answer to the question about evil in the world if God is good. I have found that there are many religions and they all have answers that satisfy the people who believe them. I do not believe there is only one right answer to the question.

Tom: Let me ask you a question, then. Do you think all the answers given to this question by the different world religions are equally valid?

Murali: Yes, I think so. After all, as I said, they are helpful to the people who believe them. And none of us is really in a position to say that our answer to this great question is better than anyone else's.

Tom: Well, I don't claim to have a perfect understanding of the issue, but I do think some answers are better than others. And they can't all be right. For example, Taoism and other religions have taught that good and evil are co-eternal realities that balance each other out. If Taoism is right, evil is just part of the way things have always been and always will be. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that evil has not always existed but began when creatures with free will chose to abuse their freedom by doing wrong. If Christianity is right, evil is not just part of the way things have always been, and some day evil will be completely gone. Now, these can't both be right, can they?

Murali: You are looking at these religions using Western logic. On that logical level the two religions seem to contradict each other. But at a higher level both are true.

Sarah: Wait a minute. I'm not convinced that either of these religions gives a good answer to the question. And I certainly don't see how they can both be true.

Either evil has always been around, or it hasn't. Which do you think it is, Murali?

Murali: I think it depends on how you look at things.

Tom: Well, how do you look at things?

Murali: I don't have a very strong opinion on the question either way. I just think that whichever way you want to answer the question is fine for you, and that it's wrong to claim that *your* answer is the only right answer.

Tom: But Murali, I'm not interested in finding an answer that is "fine for me." I'm interested in finding an answer that is *true*. If one person's answer to the problem of evil is right, it must be true, and any answer that contradicts it must be false. For example, I believe that evil exists because creatures like us have chosen to abuse the free will that God gave us. That answer assumes that other answers that contradict it must be false. For example, saying that evil resulted from a conflict among the gods, as in ancient polytheism, or that evil is an illusion, as the New Age movement claims, simply cannot agree with the belief that evil is a choice made by creatures to rebel against their Creator. So if you say my answer is not the only right answer, you're saying it is the wrong answer.

Sarah: But you're assuming that God exists.

Tom: Not really. I'm saying that *if* God exists, then the problem of evil has to be solved by understanding who God is and what his purpose is in creating this world. But I don't simply assume God exists. I think there are good reasons for believing that God exists. I'd be happy to share those reasons with you if you're interested.

Sarah: I took a course in philosophy last year, and most philosophers today agree that there's no way to prove that God exists.

Tom: Well, that depends on what you mean by "prove." If you studied philosophy, then you probably know that there are lots of good arguments that show that it is more reasonable to believe that God exists than that he doesn't.

Sarah: But these arguments don't seem to me to outweigh the problem of evil. After all, it's a blatant contradiction. If God is all-powerful, he could stop evil anytime he wants to. If God is all-loving, then he'd want to stop it right away, maybe even

before it got started. But evil has been around for a long time, and God hasn't done anything to stop it. So it seems that either God doesn't exist at all, or that if he does exist he either isn't all-powerful or he isn't all-loving. Which is it?

Tom: Your dilemma has another solution. God may allow evil because, as an all-loving God, he has a greater good in mind that necessitates allowing evil to exist, and as an all-powerful God, he has the ability to bring about that greater good despite all the evil that happens.

Sarah: What exactly is this greater good that requires God to allow evil in the world?

Tom: God has a plan to bring about the best of all possible worlds, a world with finite creatures with the capacity to love one another. For him to carry out that plan, he had to give us the freedom to do good or evil.

Sarah: Why? Why couldn't he just make everybody choose to do good?

Tom: I'm not sure I understand this perfectly myself, but it seems to me that if God *made* everybody do good all the time, then it wouldn't really be good. You see, God is a God of love, and he wants us to be creatures who love him and love each other. But even God can't *make* people love others. He can do a lot to make it possible for us to love, but in some sense that love has to be freely *given*. But evidently people who have the capacity to give freely must also have the capacity, at least at first, to withhold freely. And that's what's happened. Creatures that God created with the capacity to love or not to love have chosen not to love God, and the result has been that we have had a very hard time loving each other as well.

Murali: But insisting that one's religion is the only true religion has been one of the main reasons for people not getting along in this world. In the part of the world where I

come from, Hindus and Muslims kill each other over religion. In the Middle East it's the Jews against the Muslims. In Northern Ireland it's been the Catholics against the Protestants. People need to stop being so intolerant of the religions of other people and try to get along. Any religion is good as long as it isn't made into a reason to hate and kill people of other religions.

Sarah: It sounds like most of the world's religions have made the problem of evil worse, not better. Maybe we'd be better off with less religion and more education.

Tom: I'm inclined to agree with both of you more than you might think. I agree that religion has often been made the basis for hating and killing other people. But religion has also been made the basis for loving and caring for other people. I think that any religion that teaches hatred and violence against other people because of their beliefs is wrong.

Sarah: But doesn't Christianity have a long history of teaching those things? Look at the Crusades, and the Inquisitions. Look at the long history of anti-Semitism in Christianity. I don't think Christianity is exempt from the charge of teaching hatred and violence against others because of their beliefs.

Tom: Again, I think you might be surprised to hear that I agree with you. But I'm not saying Christianity as a religion has always been right. Far from it. Christians, especially Christians in positions of political power, have done some terrible things. When they do evil, they disobey God himself. That's what evil is, whether it's Christians or non-Christians doing it.

Murali: But if you agree that Christians also do evil, why insist that Christianity is the only right religion? What is the advantage in believing in Christianity rather than any other religion, if its people do the same things as people in other religions?

Tom: There's no advantage in being a member of the Christian religion if a person does not take the central teaching of Christianity seriously.

Murali: And what is that central teaching?

Tom: I'm glad you asked! The central teaching of Christianity is that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to take our evil and turn it around to bring about our ultimate good.

Sarah: You're talking about Jesus dying on the cross, right?

Tom: Exactly.

Sarah: I used to believe all that stuff about Jesus. But now it just doesn't add up.

Tom: Who do you think Jesus was, then, if you don't think he was the Son of God?

Sarah: I'm not sure. I don't think anyone really knows much about the real Jesus. I mean, I'm sure he was a good teacher and all that. In his time I suppose he helped people, inspired them to live better lives. But all that stuff about him doing miracles and being God on earth seems to me to have been myths that people came up with long after Jesus was gone.

Tom: How long after, do you think?

Sarah: I don't know exactly. I've heard that the Gospels were written maybe a hundred years after Jesus. No one knows for sure.

Tom: Actually, the most extreme dates in modern scholarship for the Gospels place them about forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus. Jesus died in A.D. 33, and

nonconservative scholars date the Gospels between about 70 and 100. So within forty years the first Gospel, Mark, presented Jesus as the miracle-working Son of God.

Sarah: Forty years is still a pretty long time.

Tom: Yes, but it's still within the lifetime of most of the people who knew Jesus personally. But besides the Gospels, we also have a number of epistles in the New Testament, especially ones written by the apostle Paul. Paul wrote his epistles between about 50 and 65, beginning less than twenty years after Jesus' death. And Paul says he saw Jesus risen from the dead, and that Jesus was the Son of God. So we can go back to the very first generation of Christians, and what we find is that they always believed that Jesus was the miracle-working Son of God who had died on the cross and risen from the dead. And they always believed that Jesus himself had claimed to be the Son of God in the flesh. If you take just the statements in the Gospels that even the most radical scholars agree Jesus said, you find a Jesus who thought of himself as speaking with divine authority and performing divine works. So the idea that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God very clearly goes back to Jesus himself; it can't be explained away as a later myth.

Murali: But, if I may, this claim to be the Son of God is hardly unique. All the great religions of the world have made similar claims about their great religious figures, have they not? In India, where I come from, we were taught that God manifests himself in many ways. Are we not all God's children?

Tom: There is a sense in which all people might be called God's children. But Jesus was clearly claiming something unique—something no other major religious leader has ever claimed. Remember, Jesus was a Jew. The Jews did not believe that God is manifest in many figures, as in Hinduism, or that we are all a part of the divine All. They believed that there was a basic distinction between the Creator and the creature. Their God was the transcendent yet personal Creator, Master, and Judge of the universe. And here's Jesus, who was obviously a man, claiming to be that kind of God. Jesus forgave the sins of others. He claimed to have been the one who had sent prophets to Israel warning them of God's judgment. He said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." No, Jesus wasn't claiming merely to be a human being who had realized our common divinity. He was claiming to be our Maker, Redeemer, and Judge.

Sarah: That's just your interpretation.

Tom: I invite you to read the Gospels for yourself and draw your own conclusion about who Jesus claimed to be. I think you'll find that he did not leave open to us the option of thinking of him as merely a great teacher. If he claimed to be God in the flesh but was really only a mere man, then he was either one of the biggest liars the world has ever known or he was crazy in the head. Which do you think?

Murali: I certainly wouldn't say that Jesus was either a liar or a crazy man. Everything I have heard or read about Jesus leads me to believe that he was a wonderful person. But I have never thought about Jesus in this way before.

Sarah: I wouldn't say anything bad about Jesus, either. But I'm still not sure this idea that he was God couldn't have been a misunderstanding.

Tom: Fair enough. Why don't you read the New Testament for yourselves and see what you think? If you're interested, I'd be happy to get together with either or both of you later and discuss it further.

Murali: I'd like that very much.

Sarah: I'm not sure.

Tom: That's fine. 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 Classical Apologetics

Classical apologetics, as the name implies, is the approach to apologetics that has the deepest roots in the history of Christian apologetics, and in its explicit modern form it remains a potent force today. Several strengths account for this approach's perennial success.

AFFIRMS THE UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY OF REASON

One of the great strengths of classical apologetics is its emphasis on the inescapable character of logic or reason. As Geisler observes, "Unless the law of noncontradiction holds, then there is not even the most minimal possibility of meaning nor any hope for establishing truth."¹ There can be no meaningful discourse without the fundamental laws of logic. The most basic of these is the law of noncontradiction (also known as the law of contradiction), according to which something cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect.

Although Christian apologists learned this and other principles of deductive logic from Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle, classical apologists rightly emphasize that adherence to these laws does not commit them to an uncritical acceptance of Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle defined but did not invent logic.² R. C. Sproul observes that a number of twentieth-century thinkers rejected the law of contradiction on the theoretical level. In spite of this intellectual denial, “they all live their daily lives in the tacit assumption of the validity of the law. . . . Man cannot survive or function without assuming the validity of the law of contradiction.”³

The importance and value of this emphasis on deductive logic is great. Logic is an enormously helpful tool for understanding and evaluating arguments, and is useful to the apologist in three ways. First, it is an indispensable tool for *checking the apologist’s own arguments to make sure they are constructed properly*. Those we are seeking to persuade rightly dismiss illogical arguments, even if the conclusions happen to be true. This is because the same kinds of arguments could also be used to support falsehoods. Illogical arguments are therefore unreliable, and it is the function of logic to pinpoint where arguments go awry. We have a responsibility to present arguments to non-Christians that they cannot fairly reject as misleading or unreliable. Logic is the formal discipline that provides us with the intellectual tools that can make our arguments as reliable and truth-based as possible.

Second, logic is a powerful instrument for *exposing problems in arguments used against Christian beliefs*. Classical apologists are rightly confident that every argument raised against the Christian faith is in principle answerable; many of these are problematic simply because they are logically invalid. Since most non-Christians are capable of understanding at least some basic principles of logic, exposing logical fallacies in their arguments can help show them that their reasons for rejecting Christianity are misplaced. The value of reason in this regard is heightened

because reason, unlike technical information from the sciences or personal religious experiences, is in principle universally available to all people. If they are willing, non-Christians of any culture and virtually any amount of education can be helped to recognize that their objections to Christianity depend on mistakes in thinking.

Third, the emphasis on logic is helpful in *commending the claims of Christ to intelligent non-Christians*. Too often unbelievers get the impression that Christianity is an irrational faith that requires people to suspend their critical reasoning faculties. Classical apologists work to overcome this stereotype and to reach out to the educated and intellectually oriented non-Christian with the message that the God in whom we believe is the God of reason and truth.

RAISES AWARENESS OF THE UNAVOIDABLE ROLE OF WORLDVIEWS

Classical apologists rightly emphasize that it is impossible to think about the world at large or about facts or experiences apart from some worldview. “Refusing to adopt an explicit worldview will turn out to be itself a worldview or at least a philosophic position.”⁴ Classical apologists recognize that facts are perceived in accordance with an interpretive framework, a way of looking at facts themselves and even of thinking about the concept of “fact.” It is best, therefore, for people to be conscious and critical of the philosophy of life they have assumed, and to be willing to adopt a new model if it commends itself as a more reasonable alternative. Classical apologists encourage nontheists to try looking at the world through theistic glasses and see the difference it will make. This is not an exercise in futility because, as Geisler argues, “There are a limited number of mutually exclusive ways to view the whole of reality.”⁵

This emphasis on worldviews is significant and valuable for two reasons. First, non-Christians are often unaware that they look at life through a certain set of worldview “glasses.”

Making them aware of this can *help non-Christians rethink some of their beliefs*. Second, non-Christians and Christians alike are often unaware that distinctive Christian beliefs typically seem odd or even absurd to non-Christians because they do not fit within their worldview. Comparing the two worldviews can *help non-Christians recognize the rationality of Christian beliefs given a theistic worldview*. Comparing the naturalist worldview with the Christian theistic worldview, for example, can help non-Christians understand why a miracle would seem reasonable and believable to a Christian even though it seems absurd to the naturalist. Once the naturalist understands that the real question is not whether miracles are possible but whether God exists, the apologetic discussion is placed on a much broader, and hence firmer, foundation of understanding.

RECOGNIZES COMMON GROUND WITH NON-CHRISTIANS

The third major strength of the classical approach is its *ability to find common ground with non-Christians* in the principles of reason and in whatever truths they already believe. In this characteristic emphasis, classical apologists show themselves concerned with the practical task of communicating the gospel effectively to people of differing religious and philosophical beliefs. Non-Christians are shown respect when classical apologists commend them for recognizing specific truths even while seeking to convince them of the distinctive, saving truths of the Christian message. For example, classical apologists commend atheists for their rejection of superstition and their concern that religion not be used as a pretext for complacency or ignorance. Acknowledging the legitimate concerns and genuine insights of an unbeliever can be an effective means of building mutual respect and preparing the way for a candid discussion of the truth that the unbeliever still needs to hear.

Potential Weaknesses of Classical Apologetics

During the past two centuries the classical approach has come under increasing fire both from outside the church and from within. As the near consensus of the Christian worldview has been eroded and broken down by the onslaught of secularism and humanism in the West, many Christians have concluded that the classical approach has some significant problems, or at the very least limitations.

Let us first briefly mention some common criticisms of this approach that are based on clear and outright misunderstandings. Classical apologists do not claim that one must believe in God or in Christ on the basis of rational arguments to be justified in believing or to have a proper faith. What they maintain is that for such belief to be rational, there must be somewhere a rational grounding of that belief in truth—even if the believer may not be aware of that grounding or be able to articulate it. Likewise, classical apologetics does not substitute reason for faith. Classical apologists regard some of the beliefs essential to sound faith to be demonstrable by reason, but faith itself includes beliefs that reason cannot demonstrate. Moreover, faith is more than an assent of the mind to beliefs; it is also a response of the will to God, and this is something that reason cannot produce.

While such misplaced criticisms should definitely be set aside, we should give careful consideration to other concerns that critics have voiced about the classical approach. These criticisms do not apply to all classical apologists, but they do apply to some, and all of these criticisms explain why classical apologists generally do not limit themselves to a purely rational apologetic method. We will highlight three of these.

OVERESTIMATES THE ADEQUACY OF REASON AS A CRITERION FOR TRUTH

As valuable as reason or logic is in apologetics, many Christian apologists today express reservations about the primacy and comprehensive use of reason, and in particular deductive logic, in classical apologetics. We may distinguish three concerns under this general heading.

First, *logic, though universally necessary, is universally insufficient as a criterion of truth*. This is because at best deductive logic can only test the *falsity* of a worldview, and cannot actually determine that a worldview is *true*. This is because a deductive argument, even if formally correct or valid, is assured of arriving at a true conclusion only if the premises are true. Ultimately the premises of an apologetic argument must consist of facts derived from some source other than logical analysis. It is doubtful that any religiously significant truths can be proved using reason alone, apart from facts about the world or us. Application of the law of contradiction in critiques of worldviews may reveal flaws, but, as Montgomery argues, “the fallaciousness of another world-view never establishes the truth of your own.”⁶

Now, classical apologists during the past couple centuries have recognized that apologetic arguments cannot proceed on the basis of reason alone. As we have explained, contemporary classical apologists such as Norman Geisler or Peter Kreeft or William Lane Craig are not rationalists in the older sense of the term. However, the concern raised here is still an important one, because once it is recognized that reason alone does not suffice as the criterion of truth, one must decide what other criteria will be used in apologetic argument. And this raises the second difficulty for the classical approach’s attempt to find universally sufficient criteria for

determining truth: there appear to be *no universally accepted criteria of truth that can be applied without already assuming the truth of a particular worldview.*

For example, most contemporary classical apologists employ some form of **combinationalism** (as Geisler has called it): testing for truth on the basis of internal coherence (logic) and external coherence (fact). Others add that whether a worldview is consistently livable or practicable must also be regarded as a test for truth. But these tests cannot be employed in a worldview vacuum. Those who employ them already have a worldview from within which they view some claims as coherent and others not, some statements as fact and others not, some ideas as livable and others not. Appeals to these tests can be misleading because one's perspective on what is reasonable, factual, and practical is largely determined by the worldview one has already espoused.

Recognizing this problem, Geisler, unlike most classical apologists, rejects combinationalism as a test for the truth of worldviews. He states that “when testing world views we cannot presuppose the truth of a given context or framework, for that is precisely what is being tested. Combinationalism cannot be a test for the context (or model) by which the very facts, to which the combinationists appeal, are given meaning.”⁷ What is perceived as rationally satisfactory and empirically adequate is actually predetermined by the theistic or nontheistic worldview one has. According to Geisler, “Combinationalism has no way to know whether the model fits the facts best because the facts are all prefitted by the model to give meaning to the whole from the very beginning.”⁸

Geisler's alternative is a dual test of unaffirmability and undeniability, which only requires the admission that something finite exists to proceed to a demonstrative proof of theism. This test, though, comes very close to establishing rationalism, or the use of deductive logic

alone, as the supposedly sufficient criterion for determining the truth of a worldview—despite the fact that Geisler recognizes the inadequacy of rationalism. The real question is whether Geisler’s argument for theism is sound and cogent, or persuasive.

Third, the emphasis on logical analysis has come under fire for *presuming that human reasoning is capable of recognizing truth about God*. Apologists and theologians outside the classical tradition often complain that classical apologetics assumes that God and his relation to the world are susceptible to logical analysis and description by finite minds. This assumption appears to fly in the face of God’s infinitude and transcendence, and rigorous application of it would seem to call into question such doctrines as the Incarnation and the Trinity, as well as predestination (particularly as understood by Lutherans and Calvinists). Many Christians regard these doctrines as **paradoxes**—concepts that are beyond resolution by logical analysis even though they are not illogical. Even most classical apologists today, while denying that any Christian doctrine is illogical, would concede that the being of God is beyond our ability to comprehend. Moreover, even if it is possible for Christians to perceive the logical coherence of their beliefs about God, it does not follow that non-Christians will be able to perceive that coherence. The classical approach assumes that the application of logical categories to God is a neutral, objective manner on which Christians and non-Christians can agree. Apologists outside the classical tradition question this assumption. There is, they insist, no epistemological neutrality.

For all these reasons, then, the primacy of logic is widely regarded as a potential weakness of the classical approach. Reason is a necessary but insufficient criterion of truth, and there is no universally agreed-upon set of criteria that can be applied from an objective

standpoint outside one's own worldview. In addition, there is continuing debate among Christians about the applicability of logic to the being of God and his relation to the world.

DEPENDS ON THEISTIC ARGUMENTS OF DEBATED VALIDITY AND VALUE

The theistic arguments of natural theology have inherent limitations that make them a dubious foundation for apologetics in the eyes of many Christian thinkers.

First, in the opinion of many Christian apologists, *there are reasons to question whether the traditional theistic proofs are sound*. Mark Hanna speaks for many when he writes:

Comprehensive verificationism does not succeed because of the unsoundness of theistic arguments. Beginning with a mere concept of God, one cannot validly infer the extraconceptual or actual existence of God. Beginning with a finite world, one cannot deductively arrive at an infinite God. In spite of the great ingenuity expended in attempting to frame a sound theistic argument, none has escaped the charge of smuggling in question-begging assumptions. Although there are recurrent attempts to rehabilitate the classic theistic arguments (e.g., the cosmological argument by Norman Geisler and other Thomists, the ontological argument by Charles Hartshorne, the teleological argument by Richard Taylor), they are rejected by most philosophers.⁹

The claim that none of the theistic arguments is sound is perhaps the most critical objection to classical apologetics. If the truth of theism cannot be established as a philosophical starting point for presenting the evidences for Christianity, the classical model is fundamentally flawed. Of course, classical apologists maintain that at least one, and perhaps several, of the traditional arguments are sound. But it should be noted that even classical apologists critique one another's theistic proofs. For example, Geisler disputes the validity of the *kalām* cosmological

argument, preferring a modified form of the Thomistic cosmological argument.¹⁰ According to Geisler, the *kalām* argument cannot establish theism over either deism or pantheism, and therefore cannot establish the theistic worldview.¹¹ We are therefore faced with the difficulty of deciding which, if any, of the theistic proofs used in the classical tradition is a cogent basis on which to defend theism.

A second limitation is that, even if they are sound, *the theistic arguments are often exceedingly complicated and beyond the grasp of most people*. Thomas Aquinas himself recognized this limitation, but it has attained greater importance in a modern society impatient with abstract reasoning. Even sophisticated persons capable of following an abstract argument are likely to remain skeptical in the face of a complicated, multilevel philosophical theistic proof. Concerning Geisler's revised cosmological argument, for example, Whitcomb writes, "One must seriously question whether any sophisticated unbeliever would surrender to God after reading such an argument."¹²

Third, even if the arguments are sound, it has often been pointed out that *they do not lead to the personal God of Christian theism*. Hoover adds that an excessive preoccupation with the theistic proofs actually inhibits the religious life because it can turn one away from the true personal God to a philosophical construct.¹³ This criticism does not apply to all apologists who employ the classical approach. Still, the danger must be conceded. Some people may indeed end up believing in God as the conclusion of an argument rather than as (to use Francis Schaeffer's phrase) the God who is *there*. In any case, intellectual acceptance of the theistic arguments must not be confused with faith in God. As a rule, classical apologists recognize this limitation on theistic proofs, but it is a point worth emphasizing.

DOES NOT ADDRESS THE PERSONAL DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

Classical apologists are concerned, as a practical matter, to persuade non-Christians to believe in Christ, as is evident in their emphasis on finding common ground with unbelievers. On the other hand, common ground for classical apologists is typically understood as rational or intellectual. This focus is widely perceived as a weakness in the classical approach because it *overlooks the personal, nonrational factors that contribute to a person's knowledge and beliefs.*

As Thomas V. Morris has pointed out, “no world view, and in fact no human knowledge at all, is without dependence on the nonlogical or personal contributions of the knower.”¹⁴ Classical apologists are often charged with overlooking this fact and writing as though people reason in a way that is totally dispassionate, disinterested, nonpersonal, and mechanical.¹⁵ When the “personal coefficients of logic”¹⁶ are ignored, an apologetic system becomes abstract, theoretical, and impractical. Commitment to ultimate philosophical perspectives is not merely intellectual; it is also influenced by emotional and volitional factors. Few people can objectively put on another set of worldview glasses to see if they make more sense of the world than their own, as classical apologists ask them to do.

It may be unrealistic, for instance, to expect naturalists to be willing to make a radical shift in thinking by looking at the world through theistic glasses. Naturalists may look at the theistic worldview with prejudice because they assume it would commit them to a change in lifestyle if they accepted it. They may associate belief in God with unpleasant experiences they had in church as children, or with an abusive relationship with a religious parent. To extend the metaphor, many people are unwilling to try on the Christian worldview glasses because of how

they think those glasses will affect *their* appearance. These factors are overlooked when objections to the theistic worldview, or to specifically Christian beliefs, are answered in a purely logical mode.

We should repeat the point that these potential weaknesses in the classical approach are not criticisms of all classical apologists. Most of the accomplished apologists in this tradition nuance their approach to overcome or at least ameliorate some or all of these difficulties.

The following table summarizes the major notable strengths and potential weaknesses in the classical model of apologetics.

Classical Apologetics	
<i>Notable Strengths</i>	<i>Potential Weaknesses</i>
Affirms the universal applicability of reason	Overestimates the adequacy of reason as a criterion for truth
Raises awareness of the unavoidable role of worldviews	Depends on theistic arguments of debated validity and value
Recognizes common ground with non-Christians	Does not address the personal dimensions of knowledge and belief

Conclusion

The classical model of Christian apologetics has some significant strengths. It emphasizes the importance of logic, the need for an interpretive framework or worldview from within which facts gain meaning, and the value of finding common ground with non-Christians.

On the other hand, the classical approach is beset by certain potential limitations, which are often raised as objections to the entire approach. Of these, three stand out. First, the arguments used in classical apologetics tend to treat their criteria for testing the truth of

Christianity as neutral criteria that can be objectively and correctly employed by Christians and non-Christians alike to determine the truth. Such neutrality would appear to be impossible: people come to the table with different ideas already formed about what is reasonable, what is factual, and what is practical. Second, the soundness of arguments used to establish theism as the true worldview is debated, and even those found to be sound are too abstract and complex to help most people. Third, classical apologetics tends to overlook the nonrational, personal factors that affect people's beliefs.

In reaction to these and other difficulties, most Christian apologists today working from an essentially classical model moderate or qualify that approach. Thus the aforementioned weaknesses do not apply to all apologists who operate within the classical tradition.

On the other hand, other Christian apologists have sought to develop alternative approaches to defending the faith. In the next section we will consider the one that is most closely related to the classical approach, that of evidentialism.

For Further Study

Clark, Kelly James. *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990. See chapter 1, "Proving God's Existence: Problems and Prospects" (15-54), for a critique of classical apologetics.

Corduan, Winfried. *No Doubt about It: The Case for Christianity*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997. Originally *Reasonable Faith: Basic Christian Apologetics* (1993).

Popularly written introduction to apologetics by a philosopher. Corduan follows Geisler's method and argument very closely but also presents that apologetic in a more practical,

people-oriented fashion. (Corduan was also co-author of the second edition of Geisler's *Philosophy of Religion*.)

Green, Michael, and Alister McGrath. *How Shall We Reach Them? Defending and Communicating the Christian Faith to Nonbelievers*. Nashville: Nelson, Oliver-Nelson, 1995. Practical manual for making apologetics in the classical tradition more people-sensitive.

¹Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 41.

²R. C. Sproul, *The Psychology of Atheism* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 28-29.

³*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 18.

⁵Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 151.

⁶Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact*, xiv.

⁷Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 129, emphasis deleted.

⁸*Ibid.*, 131.

⁹Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics*, 99.

¹⁰Geisler and Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion*, 171-72.

¹¹Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 401.

¹²John C. Whitcomb, "Christian Evidences and Apologetics" (class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, n.d.), 13.

¹³Hoover, *Case for Christian Theism*, 116.

¹⁴Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 52.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 53. Morris applies this criticism to the writings of Francis Schaeffer, who uses classic apologetic arguments within a moderately Reformed apologetic framework (see chapter 20).

¹⁶*Ibid.*