

Appendix A

Categorizing Apologetic Methods

In this book we have identified, described, and compared four approaches to apologetics. The rationale for this fourfold analysis is given briefly in chapters 3 and developed throughout the book, but especially in chapters 21-23, where we compare the four approaches. In this appendix we will compare this analysis to the way other writers have analyzed apologetic thought into different approaches, models, or methods.

Bernard Ramm

One of the earliest attempts to discuss the diversity of approaches to apologetics in a comprehensive way was Bernard Ramm's 1953 book *Types of Apologetic Systems*,¹ which was issued in a revision edition in 1962 as *Varieties of Christian Apologetics*.²

Ramm classifies apologetic systems into three types and identifies three representatives of each type, each of which is given a chapter. The first type stresses the subjective immediacy of religious experience as the grounds for confidence in its truth. The truth about God is found through "existential encounter" with Him, not in proofs or arguments. Ramm identifies Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, and Emil Brunner as representatives of this type.

The second type stresses natural theology and appeals to reason as the starting point of apologetics. These apologists seek to prove Christianity the same way scientists seek to prove

their theories. Ramm identifies Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and F. R. Tennant as exemplary apologists of this type.

The third type stresses revelation as the foundation of human knowledge of the truth of the Christian faith. Apologists of this type argue that the proper role of reason in apologetics is to explicate God's revelation, not to prove it. In *Types*, the earlier edition, Ramm identified Augustine, Cornelius Van Til, and Edward John Carnell as representatives of this type. In *Varieties*, Ramm dropped the chapters on Van Til and Carnell (both of whom were still alive) and substituted chapters on John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper.

The system stressing subjective immediacy of religious experience is obviously the same as what we are calling fideism. Pascal was by our account a precursor to fideism and Kierkegaard in the paradigm example of a fideist. Brunner is in our view a mediating figure between fideism and the classical approach, as is illustrated in his famous debate with Karl Barth over natural theology (which Brunner defended against Barth).

Ramm's system stressing revelation is essentially the same as what we call Reformed apologetics. Calvin, Kuyper, and Van Til are key figures in the development of this approach. Augustine is widely regarded as a precursor to the Reformed approach by its advocates, though not by its critics; but then, virtually all Christian apologists want to claim Augustine as a forebear. Carnell, as we argued in chapter 20, integrated Reformed and evidentialist apologetics (and in his later works introduced some elements of fideism as well).

Ramm's type that stresses natural theology includes both classical and evidentialist apologetics. Butler and Tennant clearly fall into the evidentialist tradition (Butler as a pioneer, Tennant as a modern proponent), while Aquinas can be viewed as a precursor to it. On the other hand, Aquinas set the standard for the classical approach, so much so that some of its most

notable modern advocates (such as Norman Geisler and Peter Kreeft) are avowed Thomists. As we have noted before, the classical and evidentialist approaches are very close, which explains why Ramm could treat them together. We distinguish them because in the twentieth century evidentialism emerged as a distinct alternative in its methodology to the classical approach.

Gordon Lewis

Probably the best known textbook surveying the different apologetic methods is Gordon Lewis's 1976 book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics*.³ The structure of the book is illuminating. After an introductory chapter, Lewis offers one chapter each on five apologists followed by four chapters on Carnell. The purpose of the book is to show that what Lewis calls Carnell's "verification approach" brings together the valid elements of the other approaches. They are, Lewis says, "like separate pieces of a stained glass window" that Carnell "sought to put . . . back together" (176). In an appendix Lewis reviews more briefly the thought of ten other apologists.

Lewis's first apologist is J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., whom he describes as advocating "pure empiricism." His approach, according to Lewis, uses "the test of objective evidence" (45). Buswell falls clearly within the evidentialist approach we have identified. Lewis's bibliography at the end of the chapter includes many works by John Warwick Montgomery (our main exemplar of evidentialism), whose approach is surveyed in the appendix and likened to Buswell's.

Next, Lewis examines "rational empiricism" as a system that employs "the test of objective evidence and logical thought-forms" (76). Although the chapter title identifies Stuart Hackett as the primary exemplar, Lewis divides his attention equally between Hackett and Floyd

E. Hamilton. Oddly, in the appendix he characterizes Norman Geisler's approach as "most similar to that of the pure empiricists" (311), though in Lewis's defense it should be noted that Geisler was in the early stages of his career at the time (his book *Christian Apologetics* appeared in 1976, the same year as Lewis's book). In our analysis Hackett, Hamilton, and Geisler are all advocates of the classical approach.

In the following two chapters Lewis considers the "rationalism" of Gordon H. Clark, who used "the test of logical consistency" (100), and the "biblical authoritarianism" of Cornelius Van Til, who used "the test of scriptural authority" (125). Clark makes logic primary and argues that the Bible provides the only logically consistent system of knowledge, while Van Til makes the Bible primary and argues that our use of logic must be subordinated to the Bible. Lewis emphasizes the differences between their two methods, which are indeed quite significant. We have treated them as variations of the same Reformed approach, however, because both argue on the basis of Reformed theology that apologetics must start from the Bible as the ultimate authority for knowledge. Clark's system, after all, is just as much one of "biblical authoritarianism" as Van Til's.

Lewis turns next to the "mysticism" of Earl E. Barrett as an example of a system utilizing "the test of personal experience" (151). Warren C. Young is also cited at length as an advocate of this approach. These two apologists are not well known today, but they were evangelical professors at Midwest schools in the mid-twentieth century who emphasized personal encounter with God in their apologetics. They may be regarded in our classification as fideists.

In the remainder of the book Lewis expounds on Carnell's approach and argues that it combines the strengths of the other approaches. In the appendix Francis Schaeffer (296-300), Os

Guinness (300-301), Clark Pinnock (301-304), Arthur Holmes (319-326), Bernard Ramm (327-31), and C. S. Lewis (331-38) are profiled and said to take an approach similar to Carnell's.

Lewis's analysis of the major types of apologetic systems is quite similar to ours. If Clark and Van Til are treated as variations of the Reformed approach, his book covers the evidentialist, classical, Reformed, fideist, and integrationist approaches.

Norman Geisler

In his 1999 magnum opus, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Geisler includes an article on apologetic types.⁴ He warns against trying “to make logically exhaustive categories of apologetic systems,” but his main objection is to dividing apologetic systems into only two categories such as evidential and non-evidential (41). He also notes that apologetic types overlap. We certainly agree with these observations. Our four approaches are not exhaustive of all positions, since, as we have pointed out repeatedly, most apologists combine elements of two or more approaches. The four approaches are like the four points on a compass (with an indeterminate number of possible directions) or the three primary colors (with an indeterminate number of possible colors).

Having made his qualifications, Geisler proceeds to identify five types of apologetics. The first is *classical apologetics*, which “is characterized by two basic steps: theistic and evidential arguments” (41). As we do, Geisler identifies B. B. Warfield, C. S. Lewis, William Lane Craig, Peter Kreeft, and himself as proponents (42).

Geisler distinguishes *evidential apologetics* from *historical apologetics*. The former adduces evidence eclectically from a variety of fields to make an overall case for Christianity, and is represented by William Paley and Josh McDowell (42). The latter “stresses historical

evidence as the basis for demonstrating the truth of Christianity” and is represented by John Warwick Montgomery and Gary Habermas. Geisler acknowledges that historical apologetics can be viewed as belonging “to the broad class of evidential apologetics”; what makes it distinctive is the priority it assigns to historical evidence (43).

Another type that Geisler discusses is *experiential apologetics*, which emphasizes self-authenticating religious experiences, both mystical and existential. Proponents include Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth (43). This type is obviously identical to fideism.

Finally, Geisler discusses *presuppositional apologetics* as a type that “affirms that one must defend Christianity from the foundation of certain basic assumptions” (44). He distinguishes four subtypes: revelational (Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahnsen, John Frame), rational (Gordon Clark, Carl Henry), systematic consistency (Edward John Carnell), and practical (Francis Schaeffer). This type is a large part of what we have called the Reformed approach.

In sum, Geisler’s analysis of the types of apologetic systems is essentially identical to ours.

Five Views on Apologetics

Finally, we consider the analysis offered by Steven B. Cowan in a book he edited entitled *Five Views on Apologetics*.⁵ In his Introduction, Cowan questions the value of classifying approaches to apologetics according to their religious epistemologies (as in Gordon Lewis’s book), suggesting that “the apologetic approaches that derive from these epistemologies, for all practical purposes, do not differ” (10). He thinks classifying apologetic approaches according to their view of faith and reason, as Bernard Ramm did, is somewhat better, but in the end he

concludes that such an analysis also is inadequate (11-13). Instead, he prefers to classify approaches according to “the criterion of argumentative strategy”—the “distinctive types or structures of argument” used to make the case for Christianity (14). Cowan identifies the “Big Four” methods to be the classical, evidential, cumulative case, and presuppositional methods, with Reformed epistemology as a new and dramatic alternative (15-20).

Ironically, the submissions by the five authors chosen to represent these five methods undermine Cowan’s analysis somewhat. William Lane Craig argues in favor of “classical apologetics,” a two-step approach: first offer evidence for the existence of God, and then offer evidence that this God has revealed himself in Jesus (25-55). Gary Habermas presents “evidentialist apologetics” as a “one-step” approach that adduces historical evidence to show that God exists and has revealed himself in Jesus, focusing on the evidence for the resurrection (91-121). Paul Feinberg contends for “cumulative case apologetics,” which seeks to draw upon a variety of arguments for God’s existence, historical evidences, and other kinds of evidence to show that Christianity is the best explanation for everything that we know (147-72).

During the back-and-forth discussions among these three authors it becomes clear that very little separates their methods. In theory Craig’s approach is a “two-step” method while the approaches of Habermas and Feinberg are narrower and broader versions of a “one-step” method. Yet Craig also views his approach as a cumulative case method, and both Habermas and Feinberg acknowledge the value of arguments for God’s existence other than the historical argument. Little wonder that Craig sees the other two approaches as variations of the classical approach, while Habermas and Feinberg see Craig as an evidentialist.

The other two views are from our analysis the “left” and “right” wings of the Reformed approach. John Frame’s “presuppositional apologetics” is a kinder, gentler version of the

approach pioneered by Cornelius Van Til. He contends that no apologetic is adequate that does not set forth the God of Christianity as revealed in Scripture as the necessary presupposition of all thinking and of all knowledge (207-231). Frame finds so much of value in the traditional methods, though, that the spokesmen for all three of those methods conclude that he does not really have a distinct apologetic system or approach.

Kelly James Clark's "Reformed Epistemology apologetics" is, by contrast, a more strident version of the philosophical apologetic developed by Alvin Plantinga. His main contention is that the Christian is rational to believe in God with or without being able to offer arguments in support of that belief. All four of the other participants agree with this point. Clark affirms that some of the traditional apologetic arguments may have value but emphasizes their limitations, arguing that they are generally ineffective in persuading non-Christians (265-84).

Craig speaks for most if not all of the authors when, in his closing remarks, he observes, "What we are seeing in the present volume is a remarkable convergence of views, which is cause for rejoicing" (317). With this sentiment, we fully agree.

Our own view is that apologetic approaches can be fruitfully classified according to both religious epistemology and method, since there is typically a close correlation between the two. Of course, as we have stressed numerous times, individual apologists tend to vary from one another in many ways, so that no 'taxonomy' of apologetic approaches will neatly or perfectly classify every apologist. The general validity of the fourfold analysis we have used in this book may be confirmed, however, by comparing the resulting classifications with those of the other studies we have reviewed here.

Four Approaches: A Comparison Chart

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Ramm	Reason		Revelation	Experience
Lewis	Rational empiricism	Pure empiricism	Rationalism and Revelational Authoritarianism	Mysticism
Geisler	Classical	Evidential and Historical	Presuppositional	Experiential
Cowan	Classical	Evidential and Cumulative Case	Presuppositional and Reformed Epistemological	-----

¹Bernard L. Ramm, *Types of Apologetic Systems* (Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen Press, 1953).

²Bernard L. Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics: An Introduction to the Christian Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962).

³Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody, 1976). Parenthetical references in the text are to this book.

⁴Norman L. Geisler, "Apologetics, Types of," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 41-44. Parenthetical references in this section are to this book.

⁵Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics*, Counterpoint series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). Parenthetical references in this section are to this book. Parts of this section first appeared as a review (by Bowman) in *Facts for Faith* 1, no. 2 (2000): 61.