

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

How to relate the Christian world view to a non-Christian world has been the dilemma of Christian spokesmen since the Apostle Paul addressed the philosophers of Athens. Almost twenty centuries of experience have not simplified this task as theological and apologetical approaches have proliferated.

An incompletely evangelized world of the first century had not yet roused itself to systematically address the "Christian problem" in its midst. The messengers of Christ had descended quickly on a relatively unwary society. World-weary after centuries of impractical philosophy, demoralizing mythology, and superstitious occultism, citizens of Mediterranean lands embraced the new faith as a refreshing alternative to their hopelessness.

Within a short time, however, difficulties began to emerge that called for hard intellectual labor. The seemingly benign incursion of Gnosticism called for an apologist of Irenaeus' stature to deliver the church from that profound and subtle challenge. A more malignant adversary, Julian, nephew of Constantine the Great, later renounced the faith of his family and became a vigorous opponent of the Christian weltanschauung, as he held up to scorn the authority of the Scriptures and their adherents. Some of Julian's attacks remain essentially in fashion until the present day.

So the church was early served notice that Christianity would not easily hold the field as the champion that would overthrow all pagan thought. While the world stood, Christians would always need to be prepared to give a reason for the grand hope they proclaimed.

The end of the twentieth century has witnessed the climax of a titanic and sophisticated counteroffensive against Christian thought and action. Some have even referred to this culmination of centuries of anti-Christian philosophy as the post-Christian era, in turn spurring an urgent reawakening of interest in Christian apologetics. Dialectical and non-dialectical materialism are only blatant spearheads of an army of determined adversaries that have recently arisen to contest the validity of the Christian message. Within the Christian community itself have emerged spokesmen who redefine the Gospel in novel ways that test the strength of theologians to reply with a clear and authoritative voice.

Truly we have entered a new period of the so-called "apologists" of earlier history. Certainly the burden of representing Christ before a new Pilate of this antitheistic age rests on the shoulders of young people who must study to be approved in the fields of philosophy and communication. Luminaries such as C. S. Lewis, Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, John Warwick Montgomery, and Norman Geisler must be reproduced in an even more articulate new species of theologian that will be clearly understood in the marketplace of ideas.

The hope of stirring up contemporary students in colleges and seminaries has motivated the writing of this book. As we shall see, at least formal differences in epistemology and method have sharply distinguished leading Christian apologists. Herein we have sought to point the way toward an effective reconciliation that will assist the Christian community to speak with a clearer and more relevant voice to our present age and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars who have embraced the Christian world view are frequently confronted by philosophical and practical issues related to the truth claims of Christianity, especially in the pluralistic society of the West. Hundreds of Christian theologians and authors since the last half of the first century have sought to defend their faith in a variety of ways. This has led to considerable disagreement over the issues of epistemology, the value of theistic proofs, the degree of certainty that Christianity provides, the relationship between faith and reason and between philosophy and Christianity, the role of evidences in apologetics, and the amount of common ground between Christians and non-Christians.

Definitions of Apologetics

The Greek word apologia was originally used of a speech of defense or an answer given in reply.¹ 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 make a defense or reply (apologia) to refute the charges. The accused would attempt to "speak away" (apo--away, logia--speech)

¹William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 4th rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 95.

the accusation.² This word appears eight times in the New Testament, and both the noun (apologia) and verb form (apolegeomai) can be translated "defense" or "answer" in every case:

Acts 22:1--"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense"

Acts 25:16--"an opportunity to make his defense against the charges"

1 Corinthians 9:3--"My defense to those who examine me is this"

2 Corinthians 7:11--"what vindication [defense] of yourselves"

Philippians 1:7--"since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel"

Philippians 1:16--"I am appointed for the defense of the gospel"

2 Timothy 4:16--"At my first defense no one supported me"

1 Peter 3:15--"always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you"³

The New Testament does not use this word in the technical sense it later came to denote. No specific system of apologetics is outlined in the New Testament. But in the second century, this general word for defense began to be used in 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 they included Justin Martyr (First Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Second Apology), Tertullian

²Martin Batts, "A Summary and Critique of the Historical Apologetic of John Warwick Montgomery" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), p. 1.

³Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (La Habra, California: Lockman Foundation, 1977).

(Apologeticum), and Origen (Against Celsus). It was not until 1794 that the term "apologetics" was first used to designate a specific theological discipline (Planck, Einleitung in die Theol. Wissenschaft).⁴

"Apologetics" is defined in a variety of ways that reflect the perspectives of different writers. Several definitions by prominent modern apologists will be given here to illustrate areas of overlap and disagreement.

Francis R. Beattie formulated this definition in his three-volume work on Apologetics: "Apologetics is that branch of theological science which presents a systematic defence and vindication of the reality of that divine redemptive agency which is resident in, and operative through, Christianity upon the world."⁵ A. B. Bruce, following earlier German writers, distinguishes between apology and apologetic: "An apology is a particular defence of the Christian faith with reference to a definite attack; apologetic, on the other hand, is the science of apology, or the defence of Christianity reduced to system."⁶ The difference is a

⁴Greg L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics" in Foundations of Christian Scholarship, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1976), p. 191.

⁵Francis R. Beattie, Apologetics; or, The Rational Vindication of Christianity, 3 vols. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1903), 1:56. Italics deleted.

⁶Alexander Balmain Bruce, Apologetics; or, Christianity Defensively Stated, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), pp. 33-34. Colin Brown agrees with this distinction: "Whereas the word apology denotes a particular defence of the Christian faith, apologetics is the working out and presentation of intellectual, scientific and philosophical arguments which may underlie such an

method of defense deduced from Christianity as a whole versus the refutation of particular objections. Thus, Beattie's definition fits Bruce's understanding of apologetic. Alan Richardson agrees with this conclusion when he writes, "Apologetics, as distinct from apology, is the study of the ways and means of defending Christian truth."⁷ This distinction is expanded as he continues:

It is not the task of apologetics, as a theological discipline, to meet a particular attack upon Christianity or to add one more volume to the library of Christian Apologies. Apologetics deals with the relationship of the Christian faith to the wider sphere of man's "secular" knowledge--philosophy, science, history, sociology, and so on--with a view to showing that faith is not at variance with the truth that these enquiries have uncovered.⁸

Thus, Richardson sees apologetics as a discipline directed toward Christians to prepare them for the task of apology which is directed outwardly toward non-Christians. He also distinguishes between "general religious apologetics" and Christian apologetics. The former refers to a defense of theism and is equivalent to natural theology. Some apologists, however, include the theistic arguments in their apologetic systems as they seek to build from theism in general to Christianity in particular.

In An Introduction to Christian Apologetics, Edward John Carnell offers a succinct working definition of apologetics: "Apologetics is that branch of

apology" ("Apology," The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975], 1:51).

⁷Alan Richardson, Christian Apologetics (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1947), p. 19.

⁸Ibid.

Christian theology which answers the question, Is Christianity rationally defensible?"⁹ Van Til's definition is similar to Carnell's even though their criteria for the vindication of Christianity differ: "Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life."¹⁰ Van Til holds that apologetics is more philosophically oriented while evidences is more factually oriented, although there is some overlap. "Evidences deals largely with the historical while apologetics deals largely with the philosophical aspect. Each has its own work to do but they should constantly be in touch with one another."¹¹

According to Bernard Ramm, "Christian apologetics is the strategy of setting forth the truthfulness of the Christian faith and its right to the claim of the knowledge of God."¹² Ramm offers another definition in a more recent book:

It is the conscious, deliberate defense and vindication of Christian theology as truth. It is deliberately interacting with the critical criteria of truth in

⁹Edward John Carnell, An Introduction to Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 7. Italics deleted.

¹⁰Cornelius Van Til, "Apologetics" (class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.), p. 1.

¹¹Ibid., p. 2. Italics deleted.

¹²Bernard Ramm, Varieties of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), p. 13.

order to show that the realities of which the Christian faith speaks are indeed true realities.¹³

Both of these definitions emphasize a positive presentation of the truth claims of Christianity. Montgomery, in a popularly-oriented tape series, approaches apologetics from a different perspective, defining it as the "head side" of evangelism, or "that which deals with the intellectual or head difficulties people have in coming to the cross of Christ."¹⁴ Seen thus, the principal purpose of apologetics is to remove intellectual obstacles that prevent a person from responding to the claims of Christ. In "A Comparative Study of the Work of Apologetics and Evangelism," Frederic Howe argues that while the work of apologetics is closely related to that of evangelism, there are definite distinctions that should be made. He defines apologetics as "a study of the clarification and defense of the total system of Biblical Trinitarianism with reference to specific attacks against the total system, or against any of the basic elements inherent within the system."¹⁵

Reymond's definition reveals a definite presuppositional orientation:

"Christian apologetics is the discipline wherein an intelligent effort is made to

¹³Idem, A Christian Appeal to Reason (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), p. 16.

¹⁴John Warwick Montgomery, "Apologetics and Evangelism" in Sensible Christianity, cassette tapes, vol. 1, tape 2 (Santa Ana, California: One Way Library, 1976).

¹⁵Fredric R. Howe, "A Comparative Study of the Work of Apologetics and Evangelism" (paper presented at the Southwestern Regional Evangelical Theological Society Meeting, 1977), p. 6. Italics deleted.

defend before an unbelieving world the truth claim of the Christian faith, specifically its claim of exclusive true knowledge of the living and true God, in a manner consistent with the teaching of Scripture."¹⁶

In Crucial Questions in Apologetics, Mark M. Hanna provides what appears to be the most satisfactory definition: "the concern of apologetics is to commend the Christian faith to non-Christians by exhibiting its intelligibility and credibility, especially in response to objections and criticism directed at its most fundamental premises."¹⁷ This will serve as the working definition of Christian apologetics for this study.

Apologetic Systems

Apologetic systems can be roughly categorized according to their method of epistemological verification. Some apologists emphasize empirical justification of Christianity (evidentialists), while others are more rationalistic in their defense. In his Three Types of Religious Philosophy, Gordon H. Clark, a presuppositional rationalist, criticizes the evidentialist approach of John Warwick Montgomery:

. . . the crushing and basic reply to the Montgomery position is that all inductive arguments are formal fallacies. Historical arguments to prove the resurrection and all sensory arguments to prove its significance are as bad as and indeed worse than trying to prove that a triangle contains two right

¹⁶Raymond, Justification, p. 1.

¹⁷Mark M. Hanna, Crucial Questions in Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 94.

angles by measuring a half a dozen drawn triangles with a protractor. . . . How can Dr. Montgomery convince a dogmatist of archaeology if he does not accept the first principle of empiricism?¹⁸

Clark instead opts for the law of contradiction as his method of testing the truth claims of competing world views:

No philosopher is perfect and no system can give man omniscience. But if one system can provide plausible solutions to many problems while another leaves too many questions unanswered, if one system tends less to skepticism and gives more meaning to life, if one worldview is consistent while others are self-contradictory, who can deny us, since we must choose, the right to choose the more promising first principle?¹⁹

Contra Clark, Montgomery claims that the heuristic a prioris of the empirical method are "unavoidably necessary in all of our endeavors to distinguish synthetic truth from falsity."²⁰ Referring specifically to Clark's apologetic approach, Montgomery writes:

Properly, we should start not with substantive, "content" presuppositions about the world (e.g., the axiom of revelation), which gratuitously prejudge the nature of what is, but with heuristic, methodological presuppositions that permit us to discover what the world is like--and (equally important) what it is not like.²¹

¹⁸Gordon H. Clark, Three Types of Religious Philosophy (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 116-17.

¹⁹Idem, A Christian View of Men and Things (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), p. 34.

²⁰John Warwick Montgomery, "Clark's Philosophy of History," in The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 388.

²¹Ibid.

Montgomery goes so far as to say that a non-evidential apologetic is "a contradiction in terms."²²

Presuppositionalists stress revelation above empiricism and rationalism, insisting that God's revealed word is the self-attesting foundation upon which sure knowledge of God must be built. Cornelius Van Til rejects the traditional rationalistic method of Christian apologetics because it allows reason an independent status apart from revelation. Speaking of Clark's more rationalistic approach, he writes, "He has granted the validity of a non-revelational a priori. Having granted this he is hopelessly involved in the coils of the non-Christian view of predication."²³ Van Til argues that a choice must be made between two theories of knowledge; either God or man must be the final court of appeal:

To accept an interpretation of life upon authority is permissible only if we have looked into the foundations of the authority we accept. But if we must determine the foundations of the authority, we no longer accept authority on authority.²⁴

But Clark H. Pinnock, an evidentialist, claims that the Christian message "is not a presupposition that has to be accepted on authority or a self-evident truth that needs no argument; it is a solid truth claim that can be tested and verified across

²²Idem, Faith Founded on Fact (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1978), p. x.

²³Cornelius Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971), p. 171.

the whole range of human experience."²⁵ Montgomery advances a similar criticism of the presuppositionalist approach:

. . . the apologetic presuppositionalist . . . cuts off all opportunity to determine the truth-value of competing religious remedies prior to the acceptance of one of them as a first principle of all meaningful thinking.²⁶

Subjectivism, a fourth approach to Christian apologetics, is grounded in subjective revelation, the personal knowledge of God which is mediated through faith in Christ. This approach recognizes that rational and evidential argumentation does not create conviction; evidence and even proof is not always embraced. In The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Emil Brunner stresses the need for a faith that rises above reason or evidences:

When a believer is asked: Why do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? he can only answer: Why should I not believe, since Jesus confronts me as the Christ, when he meets me in the story and the witness of the Apostles as the Christ? It is not the believer who needs to give reasons, but the unbeliever . . . These reasons . . . do not belong to the sphere of academic knowledge, but to the sphere of one's philosophy of life, of self-knowledge, of faith.²⁷

²⁴Idem, The Defense of the Faith, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), p. 32.

²⁵Clark H. Pinnock, Reason Enough (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 119.

²⁶John Warwick Montgomery, "Once Upon an a Priori," in Jerusalem and Athens, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971), p. 389.

²⁷Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption (Guildford, England: Lutterworth, 1952), p. 27.

Similarly, Soren Kierkegaard argues that one cannot base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge.²⁸ He defines truth as "objective incertitude, clung to and appropriated with passionate inwardness."²⁹

Clearly, there are radical differences in these apologetic approaches, but each of them has strengths that may possibly be incorporated in a broader system that would utilize elements from each. In spite of some efforts to fuse different aspects of these apologetic systems, a more comprehensive and synthetic approach that would implement the best elements of all four systems is needed. The significance of this need is acknowledged by Ronald B. Mayers, professor of philosophy and religion at Grand Rapids Baptist College and Seminary in Michigan:

It seems to me . . . that the debate between the evidentialists and presuppositionalists, empiricists and rationalists, historicists and revelationalists, must end in a both/and framework that does not inhabit one or the other polar region of truth. This attempt to maintain both poles simultaneously is uncomfortable because it will not be driven to either pole by promoters of logical consistency at the expense of actual reality. It is not, however, inherently contradictory but reflects the actuality of both man and God, both body and spirit, both fact and mind, both event and interpretation.³⁰

²⁸Soren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, trans. David Swenson and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936, 1962), title page.

²⁹Idem, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 503.

³⁰Ronald B. Mayers, "Both/and: The Uncomfortable Apologetic," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 23 (September 1980):234.

This study will provide a broader comparison of the four basic approaches to Christian apologetics than any that are currently available.

The four apologetic systems will be viewed through the writings of their leading representatives, and especially the writings of Norman L. Geisler (rationalist), John Warwick Montgomery (evidentialist), Cornelius Van Til (presuppositionalist), and Soren Kierkegaard (subjectivist). Finally, we will recommend a synthesis which would utilize, in varying combinations, elements of all four systems.
