

THE APOLOGIST

INTRODUCTION:

Before entering into the study of apologetics with any depth, we need to address three important questions:

1. What is apologetics?
2. Why should we study apologetics?
3. How does one prepare to become an effective apologist?

1. WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

2. WHY SHOULD WE STUDY APOLOGETICS?

The word "apologetics" is derived from the Greek word, "apologia", which translated means (to give) "a verbal defense." It is not a military term but a judicial term. Within the context of Christianity, it means to verbally defend the true character of God. The word, "apologia", is used seven times in the New Testament. The three most frequently cited scriptures include:

- Acts 2:14-40 - Peter gives a verbal defense of the faith
- Phil. 1:16 - Paul claims to be called to defend the gospel
- 1 Peter 3:15 - Peter tells us to be prepared to defend the gospel

The above scriptures testify to the fact that apologetics, or defending the Christian faith, is not only a Biblical position but an effective means for communicating the gospel. This is reason enough to study apologetics. It should be emphasized here, however, that the purpose of apologetics is to defend, not to prove the faith. It is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God; if we could do so, faith would not be possible (Hebrews 11:6) and would not be a necessary part of salvation. With this in mind, the task of the apologist may be said to be two-fold: a) To establish the credibility of the Christian faith given the objective evidence (reason); b) To lead the non-believer to a point of decision (faith).

The task of the apologist, then, requires that reason and faith come together in the mind of the person to whom we are witnessing. Too often, in attempting to lead someone to Christ, faith is emphasized while reason is neglected. Yet, both are critical elements of salvation.

The apologist, as we have already said, is called to defend the faith and, subsequently, plays a vital role in the spreading of the gospel. For, it is the apologist who must answer to the words of Nietzsche, who condemned Christianity as, "The one great curse, the one enormous and innermost perversion, the one great instinct of revenge for which no means are so venomous, too underhand, too underground, and too petty" (Frau Forster Nietzsche, The Life of Nietzsche, Vol. II, p.656).

It is the apologist who must defend the gospel against Marx's familiar indictment that Christianity is "the opium of the people." It is the apologist who must answer the charge of Camus, who through the

Doctor in The Plague, declared his inability to reconcile the existence of evil with the God of Christianity;

"Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?" (p.121)

It is the apologist who is faced with defending Christ against the myriads of other accusations made over the years against our Lord which are mimics on the lips of non-believers today.

3. HOW DO WE PREPARE TO BECOME AN EFFECTIVE APOLOGISTS?

Preparing to be an apologist involves much more than mastering factual information on an academic level. The apologist must also prepare at the spiritual level. Thus, the "how" of apologetics concerns the "who" of apologetics; this means examining who we are in Christ and in turn, the role of the apologist. Both levels of preparation are discussed by Peter in I Peter 3:15, which we will spend a considerable amount of time examining:

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

The above scripture not only stresses the importance of academic preparation, but it reveals the three-fold role of the apologist and the characteristics associated with each of these roles. They can be broken down and summarized as follows:

- A. SERVANT.....OBEDIENCE.....KNOWLEDGE (Apprehension of Truth—Conceptual)
- B. STUDENT.....HUMILITY.....UNDERSTANDING (Comprehension of Truth—Visual)
- C. SYMPATHIZER..COMPASSION.....WISDOM (Application of Truth—Personal / Emotional)

A. THE SERVANT

It is interesting to note that prior to instructing us to be prepared to give a reason which alludes to the role of the apologist as a student, Peter establishes the spiritual prerequisite for becoming a student when he states, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." In this one statement, two important thoughts emerge. First of all, making Christ Lord of our life requires relinquishing the right to be master over one's own life thereby, becoming a servant of the one true Master, Jesus Christ. In 2 Cor. 4:5, we are again reminded that anyone who desires to have a ministry to others must first be a servant: "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." The second idea that emerges in Peter's statement is the concept of obedience. For, in order to place ourselves at the feet of our master and to recognize Christ as Lord is in itself an act of obedience. It is this attitude of obedience to Christ that also becomes central in preparing on a spiritual level to become an apologist.

To ensure that you obtain a right perspective, everyone who decides to study apologetics should be able to say that they have made the following two decisions:

Romans 10:9 - Decision for the confession that "Jesus is Lord."

Luke 14:26 - Decision for the commitment to obey Him as your Lord.

Let us look at each of these decisions briefly. Matthew 10:39 provides insight into what takes place at conversion. It reads, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The word "life" in this verse comes from the Greek word, "psuche", meaning "identity." This word might also be translated to mean the "soul" of man. What takes place at conversion is that our soul, or Adamic nature, is surrendered to God, who then begins His redemptive work, through His Spirit. Our self-consciousness becomes God-consciousness. Once God has sealed us with his spirit, (Eph.1:13-14), we are given the ability to apprehend spiritual truths from His Word.

Conversion is an essential step in becoming an apologist. It is at conversion that we present ourselves to God as His servants, and it is also at conversion that we receive the source of all truth: the Holy Spirit. Only then are we equipped to become student's of God's Word.

Even after conversion takes place, however, there is still work to be done on our selfish nature. This requires a daily self-surrender of our identity to God. By identity, we mean our self confidence apart from Christ. We need to identify with Him instead of the things which feed our old sinful nature. We want to allow Him to recreate our identity. (See Phil. 3:1-11) This means we must make a commitment to be obedient to Christ. Remember, becoming a believer does not make us perfect, but righteous. The process of perfection is a daily process effected by Christ, (see Phil. 1:3), but one that is contingent upon our daily cooperation with the Lord. We might, then, ask ourselves daily: What is hindering me today from completely surrendering to God my identity? In the following passage from Putting Away Childish Things, David Seamands points out that the degree to which we can serve Christ is contingent upon the degree to which we surrender ourselves to Him. Seamands tells us that J.B. Phillips rendered Jesus' command in Mark 8:34 like this:

"If anyone wants to follow in My footsteps, he must give up all right to himself, take up his cross and follow Me.

Surrender is the ultimate crisis because it is the ultimate battle. There are many different figures of speech that may help you at this point. You may picture your heart as a house with many rooms. This is an act whereby you turn over to Christ, room by room, every portion of your personality, particularly the control room, the throne room, the ruling room. Or you may picture the various areas of your life where you need to surrender to God's will - your plans, ambitions, sex life, romance, marriage, leisure, and choice of a life's vocation.

Or picture your own image of who you are, and what you think other people think about you, your name, your work, and your spiritual reputation. I believe that was the crux of my battle. You see, I wanted people to think I was `spiritual'. I wasn't particularly interested in worldly things, so they weren't hard to give up. But I did want people to think I was spiritual, and that was a hard battle. I had to take my spiritual reputation and hand it over to Christ" (p.126).

We want to be sure to understand that there is a definite relationship between obedience and apologetics. And if Christian Apologetics deals with the clarification, defense and communication of God's truth, then there is also a relationship between obedience and knowledge. We might summarize the relationship between apologetics and obedience in the following two statements:

1. Without conversion, there is no acceptance of spiritual truth.
2. Without obedience, there is no clear knowledge of spiritual truth.

With reference to obedience, Dr. Howard Hendricks, in The Seven Laws of The Teacher, makes the following observation:

"In the spiritual realm, the opposite of ignorance is not knowledge, it's obedience. In the New Testament understanding, to know and not to do is not to know at all" (p.70).

Once we gain the right perspective as obedient servants, fully committed to the Lordship of Christ, we will begin to develop a well of the knowledge of God.

In closing this section, let me share with you a prayer by Jonathan Edwards which epitomizes the attitude of the obedient servant. In fact, we would do well to pray his prayer each day:

"I claim no right to myself - no right to this understanding, this will, these affections that are in me; neither do I have any right to this body or its members - no right to this tongue, to these hands, feet, ears, or eyes. I have given myself clear away and not retained anything of my own. I have been to God this morning and told Him I have given myself wholly to Him. I have given every power, so that for the future I claim no right to myself in any respect. I have expressly promised Him, for by His grace I will not fail. I take Him as my whole portion and felicity, looking upon nothing else as any part of my happiness. His law is the constant rule of my obedience.

I will fight with all my might against the world, the flesh, and the devil to the end of my life. I will adhere to the faith of the Gospel, however hazardous and difficult the profession and practice of it may be . . . I pray God, for the sake of others, to look upon this as a self-dedication, and receive me as His own. Henceforth, I am not to act in any respect as my own. I shall act as my own if I ever make use of any of my powers to do anything that is not to the glory of God, or to fail to make the glorifying of Him my whole and entire business. If I murmur in the least at afflictions; if I am in any way uncharitable; if I revenge my own case; if I do anything purely to please myself, or omit anything because it is a great denial; if I trust to myself; if I take any praise for any good which Christ does by me; or if I am in any way proud, I shall act as my own and not God's. I purpose to be absolutely His."

B. THE STUDENT

The importance of keeping a godly perspective on our position in Christ as we enter into preparation for becoming an apologist is emphasized in Matthew 10:24-25:

"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!"

This scripture not only reminds us that as students we are servants, but it warns us of the inherent danger that befalls the proud student. The apologist must keep in mind at all times that he is not to edify himself by proudly displaying his knowledge. Instead, he must seek to edify Jesus. To do so means that we must rise above the level of self-consciousness to the level of God-consciousness.

The phrase "it is enough" tells us that we ought to be satisfied to be like Christ and to expect to be treated like Him. "Beelzebub" could be translated as "Lord of the flies" or "Lord of the dung." Either

title should reveal to us that the world will not be too impressed with our knowledge and message. This ought to help us to keep a humble spirit instead of becoming impressed with ourselves.

If we are more concerned with our own position and our own status, as I was at one time, then we do not have the right perspective that is needed to become effective apologists for Christ.

"Always be prepared to give an answer...", is the beginning of a command found in 1 Peter 3:15. This implies the discipline of study. Becoming a student is a voluntary decision to sit under a teacher who will provide some insight into truth. However, this learning process requires a humble, teachable spirit. But how can we obtain humility?

A good way to begin to answer this question would be to examine the process Peter had to go through in his own life before obtaining a spirit of humility. The scripture indicates that this process took place in three distinct stages in Peter's life.

The first stage is recorded in Matthew 16:21-28, where we find Peter rebuking the Lord for proclaiming that he would have to suffer at the hands of the elders and scribes. Peter is attempting to usurp the role of his Teacher. And what is Christ's response to Peter? "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mat. 16:23). Christ sees Peter's desire to deny his suffering as an outright attack on Him by the Devil himself; who seeks to abort God's perfect plan of salvation. At this point, pride controls Peter's life rendering him unteachable.

In Luke 22:24, we are told that at the Passover supper, the disciples get into an argument as to who will be the greatest in heaven. Once again, the Lord has to chasten Peter. It is also at this time that the Lord warns Peter that he will deny Him three times before the cock crows. This passage illustrates the fact that Peter is still not spiritually ready to take on the ministry that God has in store for him. There are major transformations in his character that must still occur prior to his being an effective disciple for Christ. Perhaps, part of this transformation from the proud Simon to the humble Peter occurs after he denies Christ three times, at which point the Bible says that the Lord looked straight at Peter and Peter wept bitterly (Luke 22:61-62). Peter's proud spirit, through this incident, was beginning to be broken as he came to the realization that he was powerless in the face of temptation. Hence, an awareness of the need to depend completely upon God, which accurately describes the spirit of humility.

The next major turning point in Peter's life is recorded in John 21:15-25 which is an account of the third appearance of Jesus to his disciples following His resurrection. In this section, we find Peter being questioned by Jesus, who inquires of him three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:17) Peter answers "yes" each time. After this, the Lord reveals to Peter that he will die a martyr for Christ. This, however, does not deter Peter from following Jesus. Thus, Jesus calls him, saying, "You must follow me" (John 21:22). This passage clearly reveals a changed Peter. We now see Peter humbled before the Lord; ready to gain a deeper insight into God's truth and to receive the grace that will be necessary to fulfill the calling on his life with respect to furthering the kingdom of God.

By now, it is evident that God prepares us for ministry with real life situations. It is often necessary for God to bring us to a point of humility, through trials and suffering as Peter experienced in his own life. Only after such testing was Peter able to write the following words with conviction:

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble! Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6).

Clearly, these are the words of a humble and sensitive spirit, which is essential for comprehending the deep truths of God. Why? Because the written Word is more than facts or doctrines. John 6:63 reads:

"The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

But to have access to the spirit that flows through each word in the scripture, we must be sensitized through suffering to a point where we can humble ourselves before God. The following passages are from the book, Ye Search the Scriptures. The author discusses the fact that the scriptures are read in vain without recognizing the spirit behind the words:

At the fore is the word, and behind the word is the thought, but behind the thought is the spirit. If we only get to the word, such study of the Bible is extremely superficial. Yet, if we are able to receive an impression-the study becomes deeper. But should we stop at this step our understanding of the Scripture is still quite limited. For behind each and every word of God there is both the spirit which tells of the feeling of the Holy Spirit as well as the condition of the writer at that particular moment. And those who study the Bible need to touch that very spirit.

Failure to touch the spirit behind a certain Scripture passage means failure in understanding that passage...How do we touch the Spirit behind the word? Let me say that it does not depend on human effort but on the discipline of the Holy Spirit...With a view to training our spirit, the Holy Spirit orders our environments. Let us recognize that the discipline of the Holy Spirit is the primary and very best training of our life. Our spirit is being dealt with in a variety of ways and at different moments: here a blow and there some joy; here a little patience and there something forsaken; and thus are we led to a condition not unlike that condition we read about in a particular passage of the Bible.

...When we speak of it we know what we are talking about, for we have become quite clear as to what it is. We are not only clear in meaning or in word, we are clear in spirit. . . . Hence at the height of the study of the Bible, the spirit of the person who studies God's word is brought into one with the spirit of the person who has written it" (pp.73-77).

In conclusion, let us remember that for the person studying apologetics, Peter's life is a testimony to what must take place in our own lives before we can effectively serve God: we must become humble, teachable students. Only then can we become sensitive to the truth of God's Word and begin to prepare on an academic level as apologists. Looking back to Peter's life, we come to understand that humility is a characteristic that we acquire through choice. We must choose to humble ourselves before God. This explains why many Christians face frustration upon praying that God will give them humility and yet do not receive it. Instead, humility must be taken from God; it is the result of an act of our will.

C. THE SYMPATHIZER

Another vital role the apologist must play is that of the sympathizer, or one who exhibits compassion. This is expressed in Peter's statement:

"But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15).

Peter's words precisely describe the characteristics the apologist must display in witnessing to others and can be summarized in one word -- "sympathizer."

The characteristics associated with being a sympathizer, according to this scripture, are gentleness, respect and a clear conscience. These might also be said to be the qualifiers for communicating truth, or the manner in which we answer the questions of the inquirer. To fully understand the meaning of each of these characteristics, or qualifiers, we will take a moment to examine them individually.

"Gentleness" is the Greek word for meekness. This word functions as an adjective in several New Testament scriptures:

1. Matthew 11:29 - used to describe Jesus' own disposition.
2. Matthew 5:5 - used to describe a disciple's disposition.
3. 2 Timothy 2:25 - used to describe our attitude in teaching.

Interestingly enough, the word is used as a noun rather than an adjective in 1 Peter 3:15. The distinction between the two usages is understood in light of the fact that the adjective was used in secular Greek to describe an outward behavior displayed towards other people. The noun form, used in I Peter 3:15, on the other hand, describes an inner grace of the soul which is expressed primarily toward God. In W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words. Vine defines the noun form of meekness as:

"An inwrought grace of the soul; and the exercises of it are first and chiefly towards God. It is that temper of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting; it is closely linked with the word, humility, and follows directly upon it... This meekness, however, being first of all a meekness before God, is also such in the face of men, even of evil men, out of a sense that these, with the insults and injuries which they may inflict, are permitted and employed by Him for the chastening and purifying of His elect" (p.401).

Responding out of meekness is of fundamental importance since we cannot respond to others without dispute and resistance until we first respond to God in like manner. It is also important to note that meekness arises out of the context of suffering. As we have already seen, Peter suffered a number of trials before this characteristic could be exhibited through him. Likewise, we too may have to go through trials in order to develop an attitude of meekness.

"Respect" is the next characteristic we must investigate. The Greek word for respect is "fear." This word also appears in the noun form and denotes a reverence for God. It is a fear of displeasing God. It is not merely a fear of God's actions but of His character. We must approach others with this same sense of respect. In practical terms, this means treating the questioner as an individual person and not

as a system or philosophy. We must also go beyond the question and try to discern the true issue within that person's heart. Listen and comprehend all that is being asked or stated with a sensitive, searching spirit, respectful of their position.

What does Peter mean by "clear conscience"? This word literally means a clear "co-knowledge of oneself." It is a knowledge of who we are and what we know in light of who God is and what He knows. Paul explains it in these words:

"We all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:1-2).

Peter is saying that we must reason with others through love, so that the person we are ministering to is not torn down but built up during the course of the conversation. This means that we must not harbor an attitude of self-righteousness. Instead, we must genuinely be open and sincere in the discussion.

All three of these characteristics typify the sympathizer and could be summarized as "speaking the truth in love." This attitude is expressed in Eph. 4:15-16:

"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

This, in essence, is the way the apologist must function. His work must be supportive, not destructive, as he ministers to others.

In closing, let me share a poem that summarizes what has been said,

I'd rather see a sermon
Than hear one any day.
I'd rather you walk with me
Than merely point the way.

The eye is a more ready pupil
Than ever was the ear
Good advice is often confusing
But example is always clear.

The best defense for the faith is our lives. This is what speaks first to people. We might say that before studying apologetics, we must study the apologist. God must deal with us internally on a spiritual level to prepare us to be effective witnesses. We must at once be a servant, a student and a sympathizer. We must at once exhibit humility, obedience and compassion.

Finally, to help keep the proper perspective on the main role of the apologist, we have listed "The Seven Laws of the Apologist. These principles are based on a lecture given by Dr. J. W. Montgomery from his series on "Sensible Christianity". They are generic guidelines that can be used by the apologist, as he or she endeavors to engage in the proclamation and defense of God's truth. Now that we understand Peter's exhortation - "Always be ready to give an answer", we have presented these laws in the acrostic - ANSWERS on the following page.

THE 7 LAWS OF THE APOLOGIST

"ALWAYS BE READY TO GIVE AN ANSWER"

ANSWERS

A LWAYS GIVE THE GOSPEL FIRST

1. A lways give the gospel first. The gospel is found in 1 Cor. 15:1-3. Notice the phrase, "according to the Scriptures." It is repeated twice. It stresses the basis of the gospel.

N EVER BE OFFENSIVE

2. N ever use apologetics as an offensive weapon. We are to use it to clarify, not to convict. The Holy Spirit is the one who does the convicting (John 16:8-11).

S EARCH OUT THE REAL ISSUES

3. S earch out the real issues. We must balance the intellectual, moral and the spiritual issues. We must not only address the sincere questions people ask but the moral concerns as well.

W ALLS ARE TO BE REMOVED

4. W alls are to be removed, not built. Keep this goal in mind. We are clearing the intellectual obstacles away in order to give a person a clear view of the cross of Christ. The goal is to get a person to the cross, not to get him to agree with our personal theology.

E VANGELISTIC TECHNIQUES

5. E vangelic techniques are to be incorporated into our apologetics. There are good, reliable techniques of evangelism that we must blend into our apologetic method.

R ELATIONSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL

6. R elationships are essential for open communication. It may take some time to create a good relationship with an unbeliever before he will really open up and share.

S ELF-ANALYSIS IS CRITICAL

7. S elf-analysis is critical before we can help others. We must be honest and direct in dealing with our own doubts. If we have doubts that Christ is "the only way", we will never be able to convince others of its truth.