

Biblical Vision for Apologetics

Salisbury, 50 minutes, Feb, 2019

INTRODUCTION

If I were to ask you, right here and right now, whether you've ever had any questions about the Christian faith, what would you say?

- Have you ever had questions that have made you doubt the truth of Christianity?
- Have you ever had questions that have made you doubt the goodness of Christianity?

Now, on the odd chance that your answer to that question is "no," which is genuinely impossible, there's one thing I can promise you here today: if you're in leadership in the future, or you come into contact with non-Christians, I can guarantee you that you'll come across people who *do* have questions about Christianity. *Questions which make them doubt whether God exists; questions which, if God exists, makes them doubt God's goodness.*

Questions like this:

- How can a good God allow suffering?
- The Bible is written by humans, why do you treat it as if they are God's Words to you?
- Isn't religion the cause of evil in the world?
- How can miracles be possible?
- Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?
- Hasn't science disproved God?
- How can there be just one *true* religion?
- How can a loving God send people to hell?
- Isn't Christianity just a moral straight-jacket?

In the twentieth century, there was a famous philosopher by the name of Bertrand Russell. He was one of the most prolific writers and incredibly influential. One day he was asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on the judgement day and God asked him, "Why didn't you believe in Me?"

Russell replied, "I would say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'"

Having questions is normal.

But here is the thing about questions: if you don't address them, they can be negative.

Has anybody here ever left fruit in their backpack?

If you have fruit but leave it out of sight and out of mind, it spoils and can cause you harm. What could have been good for your health, can quickly morph into a problem that you need to get rid of.

Questions are like fruit. Left unaddressed, they become barriers to Christian faith or spoilers of your relationship with God. Addressed quickly and properly, they become life-giving!

Today, my brief has been to try and make sense of the thing we call "apologetics." *Apologetics is the art of responding to these types of questions well.*

And for the next twenty-five minutes, I want to open up the Scriptures with you and unpack exactly what apologetics is and how we are meant to do it.

Now, the word “apologetics” is actually a pretty unhelpful word. There’s a lot of confusion about the word, and there’s even more confusion about the activity behind the word.

It’s a transliteration of the Greek work *apologia* or *apologeomia*, which together are employed eighteen times in the New Testament.¹ Most of them come in the book of Acts or in Paul’s letters, but its most famous use is employed by the Apostle Peter in his first letter. If you’ll go to 1 Peter 3:15-16, we can read:

“But in your hearts revere 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 behaviour in Christ may be ashamed by their slander.”

Today, if you have no assumptions about apologetics, my hope is that I can play one small part in constructing a vision for you. If you have negative assumptions about apologetics, my hope is that today I can play one small part in deconstructing them for you. If you already know and love apologetics, my hope today is that you would feel encouraged, equipped, and empowered to use apologetics to respond to the questions that you have and that your friends have.

So, if you’re taking notes, we’re going to go through three things:

1. Getting prepared
2. Giving a defence
3. Glimpsing hope

GETTING PREPARED

Point number one. Jump back with me and notice that Peter says at the beginning. He says, “Always be ready.”

Well, this one is fun. I think we all know that getting ready takes time. Could everybody raise their hand right now. Keep your hand raised if it took you:

- More than 1 minute to get ready this morning
- More than 5 minutes to get ready this morning
- More than 10 minutes to get ready this morning
- More than 20 minutes to get ready this morning
- More than 30 minutes
- An hour...

¹ *Apologia* (Acts 22:1; 25:16; 1 Cor 9:3; 2 Cor 7:11; Phil 1:7, 16; 2 Tim 4:16; 1 Pet 3:15). *Apologeomai* (Lk 12:11; 21:14; Acts 19:33; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1, 2, 24; Rom 2:15; 2 Cor 12:19).

Now, what's it going to take to *get ready* for this type of task, you ask? Well, here's the fascinating thing: point of the passage is not about getting ready, it's about *being ready*. *And there's a big difference.*

See, there are many things in life for which we need to get ready: the conference had to get the timetable ready so that you'd be able to learn, you had to brush your teeth this morning to be ready to chat with me up close in a way that doesn't scare me off, and I had to spend a few hours combing my hair this morning to get it to look as good as it does.

But all of these types of "getting ready" are different from the type of "being ready" which Peter is hinting at here. See, the problem with these types is that it pictures the thing for which you're getting ready as a one-off event. The pay-off might be good: good timetable, great conversation, aesthetically pleasing hair. But once the event is over, *you move on to other things.*

The type of being ready Peter wants us to consider is that which career athletes would know about. See, when you're an athlete, it's true that there are important one-off events which are coming up for which you get ready. But there's something more important: you need to maintain a baseline fitness. And you maintain your baseline fitness not by exercising excessively for six months a year, and then relaxing for the other six. You maintain your baseline fitness by *consistently training*. You become "always ready" by becoming the type of person who is always in training.

And here's why that matters. It matters because it intersects with a number of reasons that hold us back from sharing our faith.

A lot of people think that giving answers to people for the Christian faith should only be done by the select few. We say things like, "Oh, I could never answer that tough question because I'm not clever enough or sharp enough. I'm going to leave it to the professionals."

The problem with this is that it assumes that you need to have comprehensive knowledge of the entire universe before you can be used by God. That's crazy.

1. God wants to use you to help people navigate their questions, regardless of how clever you are. We know that's the case because this letter is addressed to the church, not a select few.
2. Even the smartest people in the world don't always have an answer for some topics

See, the problem with thinking that you need to get ready is that it suggests that there's a time at which you won't be ready. Which means there'll be moments when you think it is justified not give a defence for the faith. And if you have some idea about the perfect apologist and you think you must be that before you ever defend the faith, *then you'll never defend the faith.*

Or when you do, and you do a terrible job at it, you'll feel crushed. Or when you do, and you nail it, you'll feel proud. You'll think, "This happened *solely because* I read enough, thought enough, grew enough," if only people could be like me.

It's this type of thinking which will hold you back.

So, what's the antidote? You need to be liberated from this idea of "getting ready" and commit to being in training, for the rest of your life – being a life-long learner in the school of apologetics for the sake of helping people.

Here's why that's kind-of scary: because it begs the question, "Are you in training? Are you getting ready? NOW"

You know, someone once said to me, "How you spend your days is how you'll spend your life." It's such a profound statement and it gets at the stakes of what I'm trying to say: How do you spend your time? Take stock of it. When you read something, watch something, experience something, do you take that extra step of thinking through how it might go towards making the Christian story more accessible to someone? When you speak to non-Christians, are you being intentional?

The command to always be prepared to give a defence anticipates you consistently being on the other end of hard questions. This is not a one-off event for which you spend a few months doing some excessive reading or thinking or whatever. This is the *life* to which all followers of Jesus are being called. And it needs constant attention.

Are you getting ready?

GIVING A DEFENSE

Now, the next thing we are told is that we need to give a defence. And this is my second point. But this is where the confusion comes from.

See, we get our word "apologetics" from the Greek word "apologia" which the English translators of our Bibles translate "defence." And, it's the type of activity you would do in a court of law. If you're trying to make your case before a judge, you're doing apologetics.

But, most of the New Testament's use of the word *apologia* comes from the book of Acts, describing what Paul would do before authorities – giving a defence of the Christian faith:

- Paul made a defence before the governor Felix, he gets locked in prison for two years without explanation.
- He makes his defence before the governor Festus (who succeeded Felix) and he gets sent to King Agrippa.
- Paul makes his defence before king Agrippa, and actually succeeds in proving his innocence but his appeal to Rome sent him to Caesar.

Isn't that different to what usually comes to mind when you think of the word apologetics? You know, I use to have this idea that apologetics was just the practice of caring more about being right than kind. I use to have an image of apologetics in my mind as that of people throwing theology textbooks at people's questions and failing to care about the person themselves. The Bible doesn't allow us to have that picture.

See, in chapter 26, Paul stands before Agrippa and the text reads something like, "Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence." Then, the rest of the chapter is what Paul says.

Does anybody remember what he says? Well, luckily you don't need to. Because, what matters is the response that Agrippa gives.

Here's where it gets interesting. The original text in verse 28 isn't perfectly clear, and we don't know how to translate it. Agrippa could be saying one of two things. He could be saying:

- “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (NIV)
- “Wow, you almost persuaded me to become a Christian” (KJV).

In other words, Agrippa could be saying:

- “Paul, you fool, don't think I am so easily persuaded,”

OR

- “Paul, you genius, you've persuaded me so easily.”

Now, as interesting as that is, and it'll entertain the Bible-geeks in the room for the next few days, it's not the most important point to notice here. The point to notice is this: when Paul makes his *apologia*, he's not just making a defence, he is making an offense. What's he attacking? He is attacking Agrippa's beliefs.

Paul wanted Agrippa to say “yes” to Jesus.

Most people who study this will agree, therefore, .that apologetics usually involves defending the faith, commending the faith, and translating the faith.

- Defending the faith means identifying someone's objection to the Christian faith and addressing it. Defence is primarily reactive, seeking to make a response to a concern somebody has.
- Commending the faith means setting out and displaying the full attractiveness of Jesus Christ. It's about helping people grasp the relevance of the story as well as beauty and power of Jesus. It's utilising illustration, analogy and stories – anything you can recruit – to help people find what Jesus described as the “pearl of great price”: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46).
- Translating the faith means communicating the broad ideas of Christianity in language that makes sense to outsiders. It was CS Lewis who said, “I have come to the conclusion that if you cannot translate your own thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts are confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood your own meaning.” He's right.

Here are some words which people will not understand:

- Washed in the blood
- Being taken to the throne room
- Soul-ties

- The lion of Judah
- Even the word “apologetics!”

Apologetics is much more than knowing the right things; it is the art of responding to people’s objections for the sake of helping someone hear about Jesus and make a response to him.

Or, let me put it this way: apologetics is what you do when you’re doing evangelism. And I think that has three implications for us:

i. Prioritise the Questioner

Now, if apologetics is what you do when you’re doing evangelism, what’s the priority? The priority is the questioner. This is the first implication.

One of the phrases we use as a team is this – please write this down. *Behind every question is a questioner.*

Which means, *different people can ask the same question for very different reasons.*

Suppose I was a non-Christian and I asked you, “Why would a good God allow suffering?” How would what I just told you effect the way you responded?

Well, it depends what your goal is. If your goal is to give them a textbook answer, then you can throw an idea at them. Now, that might be entirely necessary. They might be the type of person for whom that’s helpful.

But, if your goal is to help them see Jesus more clearly, then you’re going to want to try and understand why they might be asking that question.

Suppose I asked you that question, and the reason I ask you is because when I was younger I lost a family member to cancer. And ever since I’ve been angry at God because it just doesn’t make sense as to why he didn’t stop that from happening. That’s going to change the way you address me, is it not?

None of this should be rocket-science to you. It’s just to deconstruct whatever idea you might have had about apologetics. Let me put it another way: I actually think that a good apologist is not the person with all the answers, it’s the person who knows what answer is going to be most helpful for the questioner behind the question.

Which means this: if you get this, you’ll be the type of person who knows when a questioner needs their question answered with precision or whether they just need a hug!

ii. Question the Questions

Now, let’s suppose you say, “Alex, that’s all good – I get that. But what if someone asks me a question and they just want a straight-up answer. They want the intellectual stuff.”

First, this is why getting ready is important. And if your life is so busy that you can’t put time aside to read and study and pray and think, then... that’s just not a good enough answer.

We're going to have a time of Q&A in ten minutes, ask whatever question you like. In fact, write down your questions now. But, don't survive off our research. You can't. You can't pass on unearned wisdom.

Second, let's say you don't have an answer. That's actually fine. See, the truth is that a lot of us don't know the answers all the time. But that doesn't mean the conversation is over. Just because you've run out of answers doesn't mean you've got nothing else to say – *what a terrible vision for conversation.*

What else can you say? Well, the first thing you could say is, I don't know. Let me go and find some information for you." This is really important.

The second thing you could do is ask questions.

In Luke 18:18, someone comes to Jesus and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, just imagine: if someone came to you with this question, what would your answer be? It'd be Romans 10:9 – "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

But Jesus doesn't say this. He says something different, why? Is it because Jesus didn't have that figured out yet? It is because Jesus wanted to make sure there was some teaching-work left for Paul to have something to do, so he made sure to not say the answer we'd all expect him to say?

He says, "Why do you call me good?" *This is a question.*

Now, think. What's going on here. Just imagine. If you were to ask any typical person on the street what it would take to inherit eternal life, what would their answer be? *Be good.* If you're good enough, you're in.

Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? Nobody is good but God alone." What's he done? He's done two things:

If you have to be good to inherit eternal life and nobody is good but God alone, who is going? God. Which means that if you think that doing enough good stuff is going to get you to heaven then you're going to be very sorry about that.

But Jesus' response it also has another meaning. See, if Jesus is good, and only God alone is good, who is Jesus? God. Jesus accepts that he has been called good and runs with it. But the implications are huge.

The point Jesus makes by asking that simple questions is this: you call me teacher thinking I'm going to point away from myself to get you to God; behold, I who stand before you am he. *All this from a question.*

See, apologetics is not just about giving good answers to questions, it's about questioning the questions brought to you.

Here's what I wanna say about questions:

- *Asking questions allows people to see their own assumptions, and opens up their beliefs to them.*

iii. Connect through Conversation

And this brings me to the final implication here. Connecting to the questioner.

Of course, there are lazy questions and there are thoughtful questions. The difference is hard to explain, but anyone who has ever heard, or asked a good question - asked at the right time - will immediately know why good, careful, thoughtful questions are always worth asking.

When you ask a good question, you can get under the question, and meet the person behind the presenting question, to open the door and speak right into the heart.

One of the ladies who comes to speak to some of our team is a lady named Judy Dabler. Her background is in counselling and she is really big on people experiencing healing and reconciliation. One of the things she points out is that humans are typically really bad at asking connecting questions. Usually, we ask a series of solo questions.

What do I mean? Solo questions are questions that you ask which are completely unrelated from one another. For example:

- How are you? *Good*
- Did you see Manchester United dominate? *Yeah*
- What's your favourite food? *Lasagna*

These questions are unconnected. Judy calls these "first questions."

Connecting questions are the types of questions you ask in connection with the previous question you asked. For example:

- Did you see Manchester dominate last night? *Yeah*
- Do you get to watch much football? *Not really*
- How do you spend most of your time? *Doing homework*
- If you could spend your time doing anything, what would it be? *Playing football*
- What do you love about football? *It makes me feel free and accomplished*
- Are there other things that make you feel that way

Connecting questions are the types of questions you ask of someone based on the information they give you from the previous question. Every time you ask a connecting question, you're actually taking a conversation deeper.

You know, it's very easy to think, "Ah, evangelism is so difficult, people either don't want to talk about the deep stuff when I bring it up, or I don't seem to be able to move past the superficial stuff."

Ask connecting questions. You'll be absolutely amazed at how quickly people open up. *And how normal it feels.*

Two little sub-sub points here:

- Pray during conversation
- Body language.

GLIMPSING HOPE [Slide 6]

Now, the final point I want to make is this. Hope. We're not giving people a reason for the opinions we have; we're not giving people a reason for the feelings we have. We are giving people a reason for the hope that we have. That hope is living, and his name is Jesus.

And here's what I think this means for us. I think it means that people need to see the:

1. See Hope *in* you
2. Hear about Hope *through* you

- i. Hope in You

We are giving people a reason for the *hope* that we have. Hope is a fascinating word. Whenever we think of it, we employ it to speak about something for which we are uncertain. Often my wife asks me whether I'll be home for dinner. If I have a busy day at work, my response is usually something like, "Oh, I *hope* so." It's the type of word you put on the side of a coffee mug, but rarely the type of word you reflect on.

But *hope* is inherent to being human. We all have hopes: hopes are the narratives that sit below the surface of our lives; whether named or unnamed in your life, hope is the *thing* pulling you forward in this world.

A few years ago, the social scientist Andrew Delbanco wrote the book *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*. In it, he argued that a narrative can only give us hope if it helps us

imagine some end to life that transcends our tiny allotment of days and hours if we are to keep at bay the 'dim, back-of-the-mind suspicion that one may be adrift in an absurd world,'" and if it "overcomes the lurking suspicion that all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death.

The book traces the rise and fall of American hope: first placed in God, then in country, and now in self. He argues, that whereas before, people had a larger entity for which they were happy to sacrifice and even suffer, something shifted in the twentieth century. In place of the transcendent and the nation was installed the prioritisation of the individual. And the hallmark of a good life, therefore, has become the happiness of the human individual.

Now, just think about this for a second: when hope is centred around human happiness, suffering and pain are the greatest threat. Life circumstances afflict your hope. Which means that the hope for human happiness is naively optimistic and utterly vulnerable. Which is no hope at all.

This is not the Christian hope.

I said before that the most instances where the word “apologia” is used in the New Testament is the book of Acts where Paul is giving a defence before authorities. Each time he does that, he risks graver and graver consequences. And you think, this guy must be mad...

But, that’s not all. See, if you’re familiar with the rest of the guy’s life you’ll also know that his entire life of mission was full of persecution and danger. And if you ever want to know what they were like, just read his words from 2 Corinthians, written around the end of his third journey while in Macedonia. He writes:

“²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches”

And you ask, “How? How did Paul suffer all that? Why did Paul suffer all that?” And right there, sandwiched between his missionary journeys and his trial before the Roman authorities, you get a glimpse into his heart. He records a message for the Ephesians while sailing back to Jerusalem.

He says, “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

Do you want to know why Peter’s recipients could go on testifying to Jesus – doing apologetics on the way – amidst such cost, persecution, and danger? Because it’s a hope that gave him stability through life circumstances – even ones that were hard.

ii. Hope through You

Now we come to the centre of things: the *hope* through us. What is that hope?

So often, when we think about apologetics, we think it means knowing the right stuff and just being like academic cowboys, lassoing arguments into place. But that can get in the way more than it can help.

Now, let me stress: giving a reasoned defence for the faith is good, but it’s not the thing which converts someone. God can use it, and it might be the thing someone needs, but it’s the gospel that brings people to God. Let me put it this way: philosophy is good, but the gospel has power.

Which means, as my one speaker puts it, “We’re not trying to add complex reasoning to the gospel to make it appeal to the more profound, we’re trying to make the gospel more accessible so people can be won by its profundity.”

One of the great theologians of the 20th century was a man named Karl Barth. You might have heard of his name before. He was a Swiss-German theologian, he lived through the social nationalism of the German Reich, and he was one of the Christians who were part of the German Confessional Church, who opposed Hitler. More than that, he wrote a piece of work called the *Church Dogmatics*, and it'll take up a whole shelf on your bookshelf. He was a wizard.

On his desk sat a copy of a painting. And it's this painting behind me here. The painting is the "crucifixion" scene – one of many of an altarpiece completed by Matthias Grunewald in 1515. It pictures Jesus suffering, with Mary (Jesus' mother) and Mary Magdalene, on the left. Down below is a lamb carrying a cross, reminiscent of Isaiah 53 and the suffering servant being led like a lamb to the slaughter. But, what I want you to notice is the thing which formed the reason that Barth had it on his desk in the first place.

Notice in the bottom right: that's John the Baptist. In his left hand are the Scriptures, and his right hand is shakily pointing toward the crucified Messiah. Everyone is looking at Jesus, and John is pointing toward him...

I'm not sure what imagery comes to mind when you think about doing apologetics, evangelism, and witnessing, but might I encourage you that it should be this? Barth had this picture on his desk to remind him every day what his task was when he wrote theology. No less is required of us when we do apologetics: we must feebly point people to the crucified God.

Why? Because this is the centre of our faith. And part of pointing people to it is just knowing the story. You want to know the crazy thing about what I do? Most of what I do is just unpack for people the story. Most people have misunderstandings of Christianity. The best thing you can do is devote time to just knowing the story: read the Scriptures, recite the broad story (created for good, damaged by evil, restored by Jesus Christ, sent together to heal, awaiting the day God makes all things new.)

That good news must first be accepted in your own heart. Then, and only then, will you be able to point people to it.

Apologetics finds its goal in helping people see Jesus, and it also finds its motivation in our being found by him. All of apologetics comes from and points to Jesus. *Why? Because it's about him. It's all about this hope.*

Invite!

One of my friends from university came to know God because her friend just asked her one day, "Have you heard the good news?" She said, "No, I haven't." And so her friend literally told her about Jesus, and she said, "Wow, that is good news."