

# The Apologetics of Jesus

*A Caring Approach to Dealing with Doubters*

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**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Geisler, Norman L.

The apologetics of Jesus / Norman L. Geisler, Patrick Zukeran.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ).

ISBN 978-0-8010-7186-7 (pbk.)

1. Jesus Christ—Teaching methods. 2. Apologetics. I. Zukeran, Patrick. II. Title.

BT590.T5G37 2009

232.9'04—dc22

2008032604

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# Introduction

That Jesus is one of the greatest teachers who ever lived is not in dispute, even by most non-Christians who are aware of his teachings. Certainly he is the ultimate model for Christian teaching. Given this fact, we can only conclude that Jesus was also the greatest apologist for Christianity who ever lived.

*Apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means a defense. The apologist uses reason and evidence to present a rational defense for the Christian faith. Jesus was continually confronted with the need to defend his claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God. So by definition, he was an apologist.

Despite the fact that Jesus was an apologist and that by common consent he was probably the greatest teacher ever, it is strange indeed that no one has written a major work on the apologetic methods of Jesus. This book is an attempt to correct that serious omission.

Those who oppose apologetics in favor of a leap of faith without evidence will be disappointed in Jesus. Nowhere does he call on anyone to make an unthoughtful and unreasoned decision about his or her eternal destiny. Everywhere Jesus demonstrates a willingness to provide evidence for what he taught to every sincere seeker. Indeed, the Law and the Prophets, which Jesus came to fulfill (Matt. 5:17), inform us of a God who says, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18), and exhorts us to test false prophets (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:14–22). And those who were taught by Jesus exhort us to “give the reason for our faith” (1 Peter 3:15) and not to make a *leap of faith in the*

*dark* but rather to take a *step of faith in the light*—in the light of the evidence he has provided in nature (Rom. 1:19–20), in our hearts (Rom. 2:12–15), and in history (Acts 17:30–31).

Jesus's apostles used apologetics in their preaching from the beginning of their ministry. For instance, Paul tells the Philippians, "I am appointed for the defense of the gospel" (Phil. 1:16 NASB). The apostle Jude (Jesus's half brother) exhorts us to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3 NRSV). The classic text of 1 Peter commands us, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15 NRSV), and Acts 1:3 (NKJV) speaks of Jesus presenting himself with "many infallible proofs."

Based on the empty tomb and the resurrection, Peter argues that Jesus is the long-promised Messiah (Acts 2:29–36). In Acts 3 the healing of a man lame from birth is provided in the name of Jesus and as evidence he is the resurrected Messiah. The apostles use apologetics with the heathen at Lystra in Acts 14, arguing from nature that God "did not leave himself without witness" (v. 17 RSV). In Acts 17 Paul uses apologetics when speaking to Jews who had not accepted Jesus as their Messiah. He "reasoned with them from the Scriptures [the Old Testament, God's special revelation], explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (vv. 2–3 NKJV). Later in the same chapter he reasons with the Greek philosophers on Mars' hill, beginning with God's general revelation and arguing for the existence of God from the things he had made (vv. 22–28).

Giving evidence for God and Christ is a common activity of the Old Testament prophets. Moses is provided with miraculous evidence of his claim to be God's spokesperson (Exod. 4:1–13), as is Elijah (1 Kings 18) and other prophets. God also gives evidential tests for a prophet in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. Apologists have long appealed to these events as a basis for their endeavors. In view of this, it is amazing that there is no major work available on the master apologist himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Anyone who makes a truth claim—to say nothing about a claim to ultimate truth (John 14:6)—must provide evidence for that claim. Jesus does exactly that, and in so doing, he provides a pattern for apologetics that is of great value to the contemporary defender of the Christian faith. What could be more helpful than the model of the Master?

First, we will look at Jesus's use of testimony as an apologetic (chap. 1), followed by his use of miracles (chap. 2) and the resurrection (chap. 3) to support his claims. Being the Logos (reason) of God, it is understandable that Jesus utilized human reason in his teaching (chap. 4). But hidden in his parables is a powerful apologetic for his deity (chap. 5). Of course, he also employs apologetics in his discourses (chap. 6). His appeal to prophecy is also offered as a strong indication of his supernatural claims (chap. 7). Implied in his teachings are indications of how Jesus would have approached the subject of arguments for God's existence (chap. 8). Of course, an answer must be given for those who take some of Jesus's statements out of context in an anti-apologetic way (chap. 9). And one cannot neglect the fact that Jesus not only had an apologetic but that his life was also an apologetic (chap. 10). In this connection, it is important to show the role of the Holy Spirit in convincing people of the truth of Christ (chap. 11). Finally, from all of the above we attempt to construct an apologetic method (chap. 12). I hope this will cast light on which of the current apologetic systems is closest to that of Jesus's approach.

The study of Jesus's apologetics yields some rewarding results. It provides an example to follow, since he is the greatest of apologists. In so doing, such a study benefits not only the apologists but also every Christian who wants to be an effective witness for Christ to an unbelieving world.

# 1

## Jesus's Apologetic Use of Testimony

A man lay ill for thirty-eight years beside the pool of Bethesda, along with a multitude of sick and lame individuals. Suddenly a stranger walks up to this man and asks him a strange question: “Do you want to get well?” As the lame man begins to explain his situation, the stranger orders the man: “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” (John 5:8). Immediately strength enters his legs and he rises and walks, carrying his mat as the stranger ordered. Soon afterward the Pharisees arrive, and a conflict ensues.

What should have been a moment of rejoicing turns into a serious interrogation. The Jewish leaders confront Jesus seeking a reason and opportunity to kill him. Instead of praising God for the healing of the lame man, the focus of the Jewish leaders is on the fact that Jesus has violated their Jewish tradition.

In his defense, Jesus presents some of the clearest and strongest teachings regarding his nature as the divine Son of God. Leon

Morris states, “Nowhere in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse.”<sup>1</sup> It is these very claims of divinity that lead to the hostility and eventual death of Jesus.

### **Jesus’s Apologetic of Witnesses in John 5**

Jesus’s response can be divided into three sections. The first section, John 5:16–18, records, “So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.’ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

Jesus claims that he is the divine Son of God and therefore the Lord over the Sabbath. His defense is his intimate and special relationship with the Father. Jesus partakes of the divine nature and acts in complete obedience and unity with God the Father. Jesus states that the Father is always at work in sustaining the universe, and because of his close relationship, he does this work as well. Jesus also calls God “my Father” in a special sense. The Jews understand God to be their Father, but Jesus means something unique in his relationship with God the Father. He is stating that he is of the same divine nature. Upon hearing this, the Jews consider Jesus not only a violator of the law but a blasphemer as well.

In the second part of Jesus’s response (John 5:19–24), he declares:

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life,



even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

Here Jesus affirms that he cannot act independently of the Father. The things that the Father does, the Son does too, not in imitation but in virtue of his sameness of nature.<sup>2</sup> Jesus does not act from his own initiative but in perfect union of will with the Father.

This union is illustrated in the authority to give life. It was understood that the Father raises individuals from the dead. In the same way, Jesus claims authority to give life (v. 21). From the authority to grant life, Jesus states that he is given the authority to judge all things (v. 22). The Jews believed that they would stand before the Father on judgment day, but here Jesus states that the authority to judge has been delegated to the Son.<sup>3</sup> The Jews understood that eternal life rested on their positive response to God's Word; Jesus states that eternal life rests on their response to him and his Word. He has the authority to grant eternal life (vv. 24–27). In claiming authority over these realms, Jesus is proclaiming his equality with God. In fact, the two are so united that failure to honor the Son also means a failure to honor the Father (v. 23).

Such extraordinary claims offend his audience, and Jesus understands their mind-set. According to Old Testament law, a person's own testimony is not valid in a Jewish court of law. A testimony is valid only if there are two or three witnesses who testify to the truth of an individual's claims (Deut. 19:15). Jesus knows that these people need not only solid testimony to confirm his claims but also testimony that will convict them of their error regarding their understanding of him. In this third section, Jesus presents an apologetic defense using the testimony of key witnesses to uphold the claims he has made of himself. He declares:

If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid.

You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?

John 5:31–47

## Jesus's Apologetic Use of Five Witnesses

In his defense, Jesus states that there are five witnesses who testify on his behalf: John the Baptist, his own works, the Father, the Old Testament Scriptures, and Moses (John 5:32–46). Jesus uses the word *testify* (or *testimony*) ten times in this passage. An important aspect of his apologetics involves confirmed testimony or witnesses.

Another key Greek word in this passage is *martyria* (meaning *testimony* or *witness*), which John uses five times. It appears eighteen

times in the Gospels: fourteen times in John, three times in Mark (14:55–56, 59), and once in Luke (22:71). The noun *martys* is used five times in the Gospels: twice in Matthew (18:16; 26:65), once in Mark (14:63), and twice in Luke (11:48; 24:48).<sup>4</sup> It refers to a person who gives a witness, declaration, or confirmation of the facts used of eyewitnesses in a legal context.

The English verbs *testify* and *bear witness* are translations of the same Greek verb: *martyreo*. In the Gospels this verb is used thirty-five times: thirty-three instances in the Gospel of John, one in Matthew (23:31), and one in Luke (4:22). It occurs most frequently in John in reference to the witness to the person of Christ as the eternal Son of God (John 1:15; 5:36–47; 8:12–18).<sup>5</sup>

The noun form *martyria* (witness) refers to the testimony given about a person, and it is used fourteen times in the Gospel of John because of that book's significant theme of trial and witness. On several occasions in this Gospel, Jesus is on trial as in a courtroom and presents his witnesses to testify that his claims are true. As mentioned earlier, Old Testament law requires that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established” (Deut. 19:15 NKJV). John 5 presents one of the most important confrontations, and on this occasion Jesus presents his five witnesses: John the Baptist (vv. 33, 35), his own works (v. 36), God the Father (vv. 36–38), the Old Testament Scriptures (v. 39), and Moses (vv. 45–46). In a court case, the strength of the defendant's case is determined by the integrity and credibility of the witnesses who are called forth. Jesus presents these five witnesses of impeccable character; he could not have called upon any stronger testimony.

## The Witness of John the Baptist

The Jews are well aware of John the Baptist, as shown in John 1:19–28, which records them sending a delegation to question him as to his identity. Matthew 21:23–27 makes it clear that the chief priests' response to Jesus's question is influenced by the fact that they know the Jews recognize John the Baptist as a prophet.

John was first confirmed as a prophet of God by his miraculous arrival. Luke 1 records that his father, Zechariah, received a message from the angel Gabriel that his wife, who was beyond childbearing age, would give birth to a son. Later John fulfills the role of the prophet spoken of in Isaiah 40:3–5 as the one who prepares the way for the Messiah. His preaching is empowered by the Holy Spirit and moves men and women to repentance and baptism. Jesus reminds the Jewish leaders that they responded positively to John’s ministry because they “chose for a time to enjoy his light” (John 5:35). The word *enjoy* denotes an overflowing and enthusiastic happiness.<sup>6</sup> Although these leaders exult in God’s gift of a prophet in their generation, ironically, they do not receive his message.

John, a recognized prophet of God, acknowledges that Jesus existed before him—“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)—even though John’s physical birth was six months before Jesus’s (Luke 1:35–36). He also recognizes the divine nature of Christ, declaring that Jesus “surpassed me because he was before me. . . . I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel” (John 1:15, 31).

## The Witness of Jesus’s Works

The second witness Christ calls to the stand is his works. These works include Jesus’s entire ministry.<sup>7</sup> There is probably an emphasis here on his miracles since it was the miracle Jesus just performed (John 5:1–9) that instigated this confrontation. Although the word most often used for miracle is *sign* (*semeion*), Andrew Lincoln sees an overlap in meaning between works referred to here and the miracle signs.<sup>8</sup> For example, in John 6:30 the words *sign* (*semeion*) and *work* (*ergon*) are used interchangeably (NKJV). In John 9:3 the phrase “work of God” refers to the miracle that Jesus is about to perform.

Only God can perform true miracles, and he uses miracles to confirm his message and messengers. Since he is a God of truth, he does not associate his miracles with a false message. Because Christ’s miracles are witnessed by multitudes and are therefore

undeniable, the Jews have to take into account the testimony of his works. Nicodemus makes the connection when he comes to Jesus at night and says, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2). Charismatic leaders can gain a following through the power of their speech and personality, but Christ displays more than the ability to stir people’s hearts—he demonstrates authority over creation.

### **The Witness of the Father**

The third witness Jesus brings forward is his Father. God the Father possesses the greatest authority, and so his testimony counts the most heavily in this case. Exactly how God has personally testified on behalf of Jesus is not specified. The Greek word for the verb *witness* is in the perfect tense, which indicates the witness took place in the past but has continuing significance.<sup>9</sup> Some commentators believe John could be referring to Jesus’s baptism when God’s voice from heaven confirmed Jesus (Mark 1:11). Although this event is not recorded in John’s Gospel, we can assume John and his readers are familiar with it. Other commentators suppose this refers to the testimony of the Holy Spirit working in the heart of the believer, using 1 John 5:9–10 to support this interpretation.

D. A. Carson offers another good explanation. The testimony Jesus refers to is a general reference to the Father’s revealing work in the life of Christ: the testimony of Scripture, special events such as baptism, the confirming work of the Spirit in those who recognize the true nature of Christ, and the later work of redemption.<sup>10</sup> All these revelations are from the Father, who testifies on behalf of his Son.

### **The Witness of Scripture**

The fourth witness Christ presents is the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders, who “diligently study the

Scriptures” but fail to understand its true content and purpose (John 5:39). The prophecies, typologies, and symbols point to Jesus Christ, and he states in Matthew 5:17 that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

The reason these leaders fail to recognize Jesus as the Messiah is revealed in the following verses of John 5. These men do not have the love of God in them, and they are seeking the praise of one another rather than the praise of God. This is in contrast to Jesus, who does not seek the praise of humans (vv. 41–44).

At this point in the dialogue, Jesus begins to turn the tables on his accusers, and the defendant now becomes the prosecutor. The Jewish leaders’ façade is exposed, showing that their true intent and motivation for accusing Jesus is not that they are concerned for God’s glory but that they are seeking the praise of people. If they truly loved God, they would love the one whom God sent, who performs works in perfect harmony with the will of God.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Witness of Moses**

Finally, Jesus turns the table on the Jews in John 5:45–47. He appeals to Moses, the greatest Old Testament prophet, as his witness. In his stern rebuke, Jesus states that he will not be the one accusing the Jews on the last day; instead their accuser will be Moses, the prophet they greatly esteem. The irony is evident: Moses, who is viewed as the great advocate of the Jews (Job 1:20; T. Mos. 11:17; As. Mos. 12:6), now becomes their prosecutor.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus does not point out a specific passage here, but Moses was the author of the Old Testament law, and the Jews place their trust in his writings. The Jewish leaders base their salvation on obedience to the law, but they fail to understand its true meaning. The law is not the end in itself; it is a witness to Jesus Christ. These Jews place their hope in Moses but not in the one about whom he wrote. The words of Moses and Jesus are connected to one another: to believe one is to believe the other; to reject one is to reject the other. Moses wrote the law; Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17).<sup>13</sup>

Given that the law only required two or three witnesses, Jesus could not be required to provide the Jews with a greater number of witnesses for his claims. Further, in the Judaistic context, Jesus provides the greatest possible witnesses: the greatest prophet (John the Baptist), the greatest works (miracles), the greatest being (God), the greatest book (the Torah), and the greatest lawgiver (Moses). Any unbiased Jewish jury would have been overwhelmed by the evidence.

### **Jesus's Use of a Fourfold Apologetic Testimony**

A similar confrontation is recorded in John 8. Jesus claims, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). At this the Pharisees are angered and dismiss Jesus's words because he is testifying on his own behalf (v. 13).

#### ***The Self-Testimony of the Son***

Jesus responds that his testimony is validated by his knowledge of his origin and future destination. He affirms, "Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going" (John 8:14 NKJV). That is, Jesus as God incarnate is the highest authority and needs no one to validate his claim.

#### ***The Testimony of the Father***

Jesus then caters to the Jewish law and states, as in Matthew 5:17–20, that the Father testifies on his behalf. The reason the Pharisees do not know Jesus is that they do not know God. This is similar to the indictment in verse 17, where Jesus says, in effect, that not only is his testimony of the Father valid because he is God's Son, but also the Father testifies to the same fact, namely, that Jesus is his Son. In Jesus's words, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also" (John 8:19 NKJV).

### ***The Testimony of Abraham***

Other than Moses, no Old Testament figure is more revered by the Jews than Abraham. Indeed, the Jews call themselves the children of Abraham. So Jesus turns the tables by stating that if they know Abraham, are the true children of Abraham, and trust in the God whom Abraham trusted, they will recognize Jesus and receive him. By calling upon Abraham, Jesus plays his *ace* witness. The father of the Jews rejoices to see Christ (John 8:56), so if these Jews are the sons of Abraham, they would receive him as Abraham did. Their response reveals they do not believe in the God of the one they claim as their ancestor.

### ***The Testimony of a Sinless Life***

Cut to the heart by the irrefutable logic of Jesus, the Jews turn to ad hominem arguments: “We were not born of fornication,” and later, “Now we know that You have a demon.” Jesus’s answer is straight and to the point: “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” (John 8:41, 46, 52 NKJV). In short, the evidence for Jesus’s impeccable life demonstrates that his testimony is true. Indeed, there are shadows here of the famous trilemma: Either Christ is a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. But if he is not a liar (for which they have no evidence), then he is either a lunatic or Lord. But how could he be a lunatic since he has God, Abraham, and his own sinless life as his witnesses?

Some, like Bertrand Russell, have searched for flaws in Jesus’s character, but their efforts have proved futile. Russell argues that anyone who warns people of eternal punishment is not “profoundly humane.”<sup>14</sup> But this begs the question of whether there is a hell, for if there is a hell—and Jesus as the Son of God should know—then it would be profoundly inhumane *not* to warn people that they are headed there! Russell’s other argument—that anyone who unnecessarily drowns pigs, as Jesus did, is unkind—fares no better. One could say that Russell’s argument is overconfident and based on a lack of knowledge. First of all, Jesus did not drown the pigs; the demons did. Second, Jesus is master of his creation and therefore can do what he



wills with those he has created. Third, Russell is more interested in the pigs than the people whom Jesus delivered from the demons. The character of Christ has been well attested by both friend and foe.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Russell himself says that even though Christ is not perfect (based on his imperfect arguments above), nonetheless, “I grant Him a very high degree of moral goodness.”<sup>16</sup> He also says elsewhere that what the world needs is “love, Christian love, or compassion”<sup>17</sup>—which is a great compliment to the character of Christ. Indeed, no one has expressed any greater love than Christ (John 15:13; Rom. 5:6–8). Brilliant as Russell is, a careful analysis reveals that the flaws are not in Christ’s character but in Russell’s arguments.

## Conclusion

From these examples of Jesus, we learn several key lessons: First, in making his case, Jesus gives reasons and evidence for his claims. He does not expect his listeners simply to believe or make a blind leap of faith. Second, the evidence Jesus gives includes firsthand, eyewitness, and supernatural events. Third, Jesus provides multiple witnesses in defense of his claim. This is a key part of Jesus’s apologetics, which includes testimony from credible witnesses. Thus, given his monotheistic context, Jesus is an evidentialist, not a fideist, in that he believes in the use of evidence to convince others of the truth of his claims.

In John 5:31–47 Jesus presents five credible witnesses: John the Baptist, his works, the Father, the Old Testament, and Moses. In John 8:12–41 Jesus points to the testimony of his heavenly Father and adds the testimony of Abraham and of his own sinless life. The power of Jesus’s argument rests in the integrity and credibility of his witnesses. Not only does he present forceful witnesses, but in the process of defending himself, he turns the tables on his accusers. No reasonable Jew has any valid grounds on which to reject Jesus’s witnesses; his apologetic tactic is very effective.