

*Mere*

APOLOGETICS

HOW TO HELP SEEKERS  
& SKEPTICS FIND FAITH

ALISTER E.  
MCGRATH

*Mere*  
A P O L O G E T I C S

HOW TO HELP SEEKERS  
AND SKEPTICS FIND FAITH

ALISTER E. MCGRATH



**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

McGrath, Alister E., 1953–

Mere apologetics : how to help seekers and skeptics find faith / Alister E. McGrath.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1416-1 (pbk.)

1. Apologetics. I. Title.

BT1103.M345 2011

239—dc23

2011029417

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# Introduction

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This book is an introduction to apologetics—the field of Christian thought that focuses on the justification of the core themes of the Christian faith and its effective communication to the non-Christian world. It commends a mindset of *engagement*, encouraging Christians to interact with the ideas of our culture rather than running away from them or pretending they can be ignored. Apologetics aims to convert believers into thinkers, and thinkers into believers. It engages our reason, our imagination, and our deepest longings. It opens hearts, eyes, and minds. As the great apologist G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) once quipped, “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.”<sup>1</sup> Apologetics celebrates and proclaims the intellectual solidity, the imaginative richness, and the spiritual depth of the gospel in ways that can connect with our culture.

Apologetics is to be seen not as a defensive and hostile reaction against the world, but as a welcome opportunity to exhibit, celebrate, and display the treasure chest of the Christian faith. It encourages believers to appreciate their faith, and to explain and commend it to those outside the church. It aims to set out the intellectual, moral, imaginative, and relational richness of the Christian faith—partly to reassure believers and help them develop their faith, but primarily to enable those outside the community of faith to realize the compelling vision that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.

This book sets out to introduce its readers to the leading themes of apologetics, presenting a basic understanding of its agendas and approaches. I have tried to make this book accessible, interesting, and useful, while giving pointers to more advanced resources that will allow you, the reader, to take things further in your own time. It is not comprehensive, so you will need to supplement it with more advanced and specialized texts. Nor is it committed to any particular school of apologetics. Rather than limiting itself to any one specific school or approach to apologetics, this work draws on their collective riches. It aims to encourage and equip its readers to develop an apologetic mindset, and explore further how to explain and commend the gospel to our culture. In many ways, the book's approach mirrors that of C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), perhaps the greatest apologist of the twentieth century. It aims to help you get an idea of what the issues are and how Christians can respond to them. Like any introduction, it will leave you wanting to know more and go further. It cannot hope to answer all of your questions!

All the material used in this book has been tested on student audiences and in public addresses over a period of six years, primarily in a foundational lecture course I teach at the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics entitled “An Introduction to Christian Apologetics.” This has been supplemented by material developed for summer schools in Oxford and at Regent College, Vancouver, dealing with the central themes of apologetics and how they enable the church to engage positively and powerfully with the questions our culture is asking. I am deeply grateful to my students for their feedback, ideas, and stimulus, which have been so important to me in developing the approach set out in this book. I hope it will help others to discover why apologetics is so interesting on the one hand, and so vital to the future of the Christian faith on the other.

Alister McGrath  
King's College, London  
December 2010




# 1

## Getting Started

### WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

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The Great Commission gives every Christian the privilege and responsibility of preaching the Good News until the end of history: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18–20 NIV). Every Christian alive today is linked, through a complex chain of historical events, with this pivotal moment. Each of us has a family tree of faith reaching back into the mists of time. Down the ages, like runners in a great relay race of history, others have passed this Good News from one generation to another. And now the baton has been handed to us. It’s our turn. We have been entrusted with passing on the Good News to those around and beyond us.

It is an exciting thought. For a start, it helps us to see how we fit into a bigger picture. Yet for many it is also a rather challenging thought. It seems too big a demand. Are we really up for this? How can we cope with such a weighty responsibility? It is important to realize that Christians have always felt overwhelmed by the challenges of passing on our faith. We feel that we lack the wisdom, insight, and strength to do this—and we are right to feel so. But we must appreciate that God knows us, exactly as we are (Ps. 139). He knows our deepest secrets, our strengths, and our weaknesses. And God is able to work in us and through us to speak to the world for which Christ died.

One of the great themes of the Christian Bible is that, whenever God asks us to do something for him, he gives us the gifts we need to do it. Knowing us for what we are, he equips us for what he wants us to do. The Great Commission includes both a command and a promise. The risen Christ's *command* to his disciples is bold and challenging: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19 NIV). His *promise* to those disciples is equally reassuring and encouraging: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (v. 20 NIV). It is a deeply comforting thought. We are not on our own. The risen Christ stands by us and with us, as we do our best to hand on and hand over the Good News of who Christ is and what he has done for us.

Yet knowing that we are accompanied and strengthened in our journey of faith by the risen Christ does not solve the many questions we must face and explore as we commend and proclaim the gospel. How can anyone do justice to the excitement, joy, and wonder of the Christian gospel? Time and time again, we find ourselves unable to express its richness adequately in words. The reality of God and the gospel always exceeds our ability to express it. How can we respond effectively to the questions our culture is asking about God, or the objections it raises to faith? How can we find vivid, faithful, and dynamic ways of explaining and expressing the gospel, allowing it to connect with the hopes and fears of those around us?

How can Christians explain their faith in terms that make sense to people outside the church? How can we counter misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the Christian faith? How can we communicate the truth, attractiveness, and joy of the Christian gospel to our culture? These are questions that have been addressed by Christians since the time of the New Testament. Traditionally, this is known as the discipline of *apologetics*—the subject of this book.

## Defining Apologetics

So what is apologetics? Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the Christian church's greatest theologians, is widely admired as a biblical interpreter, a preacher, and an expositor of the grace of God. One of his most significant contributions to the development of

Christian theology is his reflections on the doctrine of the Trinity. As readers will know, this doctrine often causes difficulties for people. Augustine, however, had his own problem with the formula “three persons, one God.” Why, he complained, did Christians use the word “person” here? It just wasn’t helpful. Surely there had to be a better word to use. In the end, Augustine came to the conclusion that there probably wasn’t, and the church would just have to keep on using the word “person” in this way.

I often feel like that when using the term “apologetics.” It doesn’t seem to be a very helpful word. For most people it suggests the idea of “saying you’re sorry.” Now I am sure there is much that the Christian church needs to say it’s sorry about. But that’s not really what apologetics is all about. As if that’s not enough, the word “apologetics” sounds as if it’s plural—but it’s really singular (like “scissors”). Yet while Christian writers have sought alternative terms down the ages, none really seems to have caught on. We’re just going to have to keep on using “apologetics.” But if we can’t change the word, we can make sure we understand its richness of meaning.

The term “apologetics” makes a lot more sense when we consider the meaning of the Greek word on which it is based—*apologia*. An *apologia* is a “defense,” a reasoned case proving the innocence of an accused person in court, or a demonstration of the correctness of an argument or belief. We find this term used in 1 Peter 3:15, which many see as a classic biblical statement of the importance of apologetics:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason [*logos*] for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (NIV)

It is an important text, worth reading in its full context. The first letter of Peter is addressed to Christians in the region of the Roman Empire known as Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Peter offers them reassurance and comfort as they face the threat of persecution. He encourages them to engage their critics and questioners by explaining the basis and content of their faith with gentleness and respect.

Peter clearly assumes that Christian ideas are being misunderstood or misrepresented, and urges his readers to set the record straight—but to do so graciously and considerately. For Peter, apologetics is about defending the truth with gentleness and respect. The object of apologetics is not to antagonize or humiliate those outside the church, but to help open their eyes to the reality, reliability, and relevance of the Christian faith. There must be no mismatch or contradiction between the message that is proclaimed and the tone of the messenger's proclamation. We must be winsome, generous, and gracious. If the gospel is to cause difficulty, it must be on account of its intrinsic nature and content, not the manner in which it is proclaimed.<sup>1</sup> It is one thing for the gospel to give offense; it is quite another for its defenders to cause offense by unwise choice of language or an aggressive and dismissive attitude toward outsiders.

Christians have taken this advice seriously from the earliest days of the church. The New Testament itself contains several important passages—mostly in the Acts of the Apostles—that explain, commend, and defend the Christian faith to a variety of audiences. For example, Peter's famous sermon on the day of Pentecost argues that Jesus of Nazareth is the culmination of the hopes of Israel (Acts 2). Paul's equally famous sermon to the philosophers of Athens argues that Jesus of Nazareth is the culmination of the long human quest for wisdom (Acts 17).

This engagement continued throughout the history of the church. Early Christian writers were especially concerned to engage Platonism. How could they communicate the truth and power of the gospel to an audience used to thinking in Platonic ways? This approach involved the identification of both possibilities and challenges, leading to the exploitation of those possibilities and the neutralization of those challenges. Yet Platonism generally fell out of fashion in the early Middle Ages. Aristotle became the philosopher of choice in most western universities from the thirteenth century until the early sixteenth century. Once more, Christian apologists rose to this challenge. They identified the challenges raised by Aristotelianism—such as its belief in the eternity of the world. And they also identified the openings it created for faith. That task continues today, as we face new intellectual and cultural

challenges and opportunities. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenges arising from cultural changes—and so fail to see the opportunities they offer.

## The Basic Themes of Christian Apologetics

Before exploring these possibilities, we need to think a little more about the nature of apologetics. What issues does it engage? How does it help us proclaim and communicate the gospel? We could summarize the three tasks faced by apologists of the past and present under three main headings: defending, commending, and translating.

### *Defending*

Here, the apologist sets out to find the barriers to faith. Have they arisen through misunderstandings or misrepresentations? If so, these need to be corrected. Have they arisen because of a genuine difficulty over Christian truth claims? If so, these need to be addressed. It is important to note that defense is generally a reactive strategy. Someone comes up with a concern; we are obliged to respond to it. Happily, there are excellent responses that can be made, and the apologist needs to know and understand these. Where honest questions are sincerely asked, honest answers must be powerfully yet graciously given.

Yet everyone has different questions, concerns, and anxieties. As a result, the apologist needs to know her audience. What are the difficulties people experience with the Christian gospel? One of the first things that the apologist learns when he does apologetics—as opposed to just reading books about it—is that audiences vary enormously. Each person has his or her own specific difficulties about faith and must not be reduced to a generalized stereotype.

These difficulties are often intellectual, concerning questions about the evidential basis for faith or some core Christian doctrines. But it is important to realize that not all of these difficulties fall into this category. Some are much deeper concerns, and are not so much about problems with rational understanding as about problems with existential commitment. French apologist Blaise Pascal (1623–62)

once perceptively commented: “The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing about.” Apologetics aims to identify these barriers to faith, whatever their nature, and offer responses that help to overcome them.

Apologetics thus encourages Christians to develop a “discipleship of the mind.” Before we can answer the questions others ask us about our faith, we need to have answered them for ourselves. Christ calls on his followers to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind (Matt. 22:37). Paul also speaks about the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2) as part of the process of transforming our lives. To be a Christian is to think about our faith, beginning to forge answers to our own questions. Apologetics is about going further and deeper into the Christian faith, discovering its riches. It’s good for our own appreciation of the richness and reasonableness of our faith. But, perhaps just as importantly, it enables us to deal with the questions that others have.

It is also important to appreciate that it is not just people outside the church who are asking questions about faith. Many Christians also experience difficulties with their faith and find themselves looking for explanations or approaches that will help them sustain it. While the primary focus of apologetics may indeed be culture at large, we must never forget that many Christians need help with their faith. Why does God allow suffering? How can I make sense of the Trinity? Will my pets go to heaven when they die? These are all apologetic questions familiar to any pastor. And they need to be answered. Happily, there are indeed answers that are deeply rooted in the long Christian tradition of engaging Scripture.

It is important for Christians to show that they understand these concerns, and don’t see them simply as arguments to be lightly and easily dismissed. We need to deal with them sensitively and compassionately, entering into the mind of the person who finds them a problem. Why is it a problem? What have you seen that they haven’t? How can you help them see things in a new way that either neutralizes the problem or makes it clear this is a problem they’re already well used to in other areas of life? It is important not to be dismissive, but gracious and sympathetic. Apologetics is as much about our personal attitudes and character as it is about our arguments and analysis. You can defend the gospel without being defensive in your attitude.

### *Commending*

Here, the apologist sets out to allow the truth and relevance of the gospel to be appreciated by the audience. The audience may be a single person or a large group of people. In each case, the apologist will try to allow the full wonder and brilliance of the Christian faith to be understood and appreciated. The gospel does not need to be made relevant to these audiences. The question is how we help the audience grasp this relevance—for example, by using helpful illustrations, analogies, or stories that allow them to connect with it.

Apologetics thus has a strongly positive dimension—setting out the full attractiveness of Jesus Christ so that those outside the faith can begin to grasp why he merits such serious consideration. Christ himself once compared the kingdom of heaven to a pearl of great price: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt. 13:45–46 NIV). The merchant knew about pearls, and he could see that this particular pearl was so beautiful and valuable it was worth giving up everything so he could possess it.

As we shall see, one classic way of doing this is to show that Christianity is rationally compelling. It makes better sense of things than its rivals. Yet it is vitally important not to limit the appeal of the gospel to human reason. What of the human heart? Time after time, the Gospels tell us people were drawn to Jesus of Nazareth because they realized he could transform their lives. While arguments are important in apologetics, they have their limits. Many are attracted to the Christian faith today because of their belief that it will change their lives. Their criterion of validation is not so much “Is this true?” but “Will this work?”

Our task is to help people realize that the Christian faith is so exciting and wonderful that nothing else can compare to it. This means helping people grasp the attractiveness of the faith. Theology allows us to identify and appreciate the individual elements of the Christian faith. It is like someone opening a treasure chest and holding up jewels, pearls, and precious metals, one by one, so that each may be seen individually and appreciated. It is like holding a diamond up to the light, so that each of its facets scintillates, allowing its beauty and glory to be appreciated.

### *Translating*

Here, the apologist recognizes that many of the core ideas and themes of the Christian faith are likely to be unfamiliar to many audiences. They need to be explained using familiar or accessible images, terms, or stories. C. S. Lewis is rightly regarded as a master of this skill, and his estimation of its importance must be taken to heart:

We must learn the language of our audience. And let me say at the outset that it is no use laying down *a priori* what the “plain man” does or does not understand. You have to find out by experience. . . . You must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. . . . 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.<sup>2</sup>

The issue here is about how we faithfully and effectively communicate the Christian faith to a culture that may not understand traditional Christian terms or concepts. We need to be able to set out and explain the deep attraction of the Christian gospel for our culture, using language and images it can access. It is no accident that Christ used parables to teach about the kingdom of God. He used language and imagery already familiar to the rural Palestinian culture of his age to communicate deeper spiritual truths.

So how can we translate core ideas of the Christian faith—such as redemption and salvation—into the cultural vernacular? Biblical terms need to be explained and interpreted if they are to resonate with where people are today. An example will make this point clearer. Paul declares that “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1 NIV). This is clearly a statement of a core element of the Christian gospel. But it will not be understood by contemporary audiences, who will probably misunderstand Paul’s central notion of “justification” in one of two ways:

1. A defense of our integrity or “rightness,” in the sense of “I provided a justification of my actions to my employers.” It’s about showing that we are right.



2. The alignment of the text against the right-hand margin of a document, particularly when word processing. It's about straightening up a ragged text.

Neither of these really illuminates Paul's meaning in Romans 5:1; indeed, it could be argued that both definitions are likely to mislead people about his intentions and concerns. Paul's idea of justification thus needs to be explained in terms that are both faithful to his original intention and intelligible to contemporary audiences. One might, for example, begin to explain this by talking about being "put right" with God, allowing both the relational and judicial aspects of the concept of justification to be explored.

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From what has been said thus far, it is clear that apologetics is concerned with three themes, each of which brings new depth to our personal faith and a new quality to our Christian witness:

1. Identifying and responding to objections or difficulties concerning the gospel, and helping to overcome these barriers to faith.
2. Communicating the excitement and wonder of the Christian faith, so that its potential to transform the human situation can be appreciated.
3. Translating the core ideas of the Christian faith into language that makes sense to outsiders.

We shall be considering each of these issues in greater depth later in the book. We now need to consider how apologetics relates to evangelism.

## **Apologetics and Evangelism**

From what has just been said, it can be seen that Christian apologetics represents a serious and sustained engagement with the "ultimate questions" raised by a culture, people group, or individual, aiming to show how the Christian faith is able to provide meaningful answers to such questions. Where is God in the suffering of the world? Is faith in God reasonable? Apologetics clears the ground for evangelism, just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

Evangelism moves beyond this attempt to demonstrate the cultural plausibility of the Christian faith. Where apologetics can be considered to clear the ground for faith in Christ, evangelism invites people to respond to the gospel. Where apologetics aims to secure *consent*, evangelism aims to secure *commitment*. David Bosch's influential and widely accepted definition of evangelism makes this point well:

Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sins, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Developing this same approach, we might say that apologetics aims to establish the plausibility of salvation in Christ—for example, by developing an intellectual case based on cultural history for the fall-enness or sinfulness of humanity, or by appealing to the experience of spiritual longing as a sign of alienation from God and our true destiny. The task of apologetics is therefore to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, just as someone might clear rocks and other roadblocks from a pathway.

The dividing line between apologetics and evangelism is fuzzy; making a distinction between them, however, is helpful. Apologetics is conversational, where evangelism is invitational.<sup>4</sup> While an apologetic conversation about the Christian faith can easily lead into an invitation to faith, it is much more concerned with removing misunderstandings, explaining ideas, and exploring the personal relevance of faith. Apologetics is about persuading people that there is a door to another world—a door that perhaps they never realized existed. Evangelism is about helping people to open that door and enter into the new world that lies beyond.

A rough working definition of evangelism might be “inviting someone to become a Christian.” Apologetics could then be thought of as clearing the ground for that invitation so that it is more likely to receive a positive response. Or again, evangelism could be said to be like offering someone bread. Apologetics would then be about persuading people there is bread to be had and it is good to eat.

An example may help make this point clearer. Jesus of Nazareth often compared the kingdom of God to a feast (Luke 14:15–24). Apologetics can be thought of as explaining to people that there really is going to be a feast. It invites them to reflect on what they might find there—the food and the drink. How wonderful it would be to be invited! If only this were true! As Blaise Pascal once quipped, we must “make good people wish that [the Christian faith] were true, and then show that it is.”<sup>5</sup> Pascal’s point is that we ought to help people long for what the Christian faith promises—and then show them it is indeed true and real. The desire for something provides the motivation to check it out.

Evangelism is different. It issues a personal invitation: “You are invited to the feast! Please come!” Apologetics lays the ground for this invitation; evangelism extends it. Both are an essential part of the mission of the church. Apologetics establishes and proclaims the plausibility and desirability of the gospel; evangelism summons people to enter into it and share in its benefits. Apologetics is not evangelism, and is inadequate without it. Yet it has an important and distinct role to play in the Christian community’s engagement with the world, as well as in encouraging and developing the faith of Christian believers.

However, there are potential difficulties with apologetics that need to be identified. Every tool needs to be calibrated to make sure that we understand its strengths and weaknesses. We need to know the conditions under which it works well, and when it is likely to go wrong. We shall consider this matter in the next section.

## The Limitations of Apologetics

When properly understood and properly used, apologetics is of vital importance to the ministry of the church. It can bring a new quality and intellectual depth to the life of ordinary believers, equipping them to answer their own questions about their faith and those asked by their friends. And it helps us build bridges to our culture, preparing the way for the gospel proclamation. Yet apologetics can easily be misunderstood and just as easily misapplied.

One of the things apologetics aims to do is translate key ideas of the Christian faith into categories the world can understand. For example, some biblical terms—such as justification—need to be interpreted to

secular culture, as they are liable to be misunderstood. Yet although this process of “cultural translation” of key gospel ideas can be enormously important in helping people understand what the Christian faith is all about, it can lead to two unhelpful outcomes.

First, translation into cultural terms can easily lead to Christian ideas being reduced to their cultural equivalents. For example, it is helpful to think of Jesus Christ as the mediator between humanity and God, and there is excellent New Testament warrant for speaking of Christ in this way. It helps identify what is so important about Christ from a Christian perspective. Yet modern western culture understands a “mediator” in a professional sense—someone experienced at conflict resolution who is asked to sort out a dispute between two parties. Speaking of Jesus Christ as mediator risks reducing his role to what contemporary culture understands by the idea—for example, Jesus as the peacemaker. We need to make sure we do not reduce Jesus Christ or the Christian gospel to terms our culture can understand. Apologetics can lead to loss of distinctive Christian identity.

This can, of course, be avoided by making it clear that apologetics is aiming to establish bridges with contemporary culture. In the end, the gospel is not something that can or should be reduced to western cultural norms. Rather, it is something whose truth and relevance can be more effectively communicated through the judicious choice and use of cultural analogies, values, or stories. But it is not the same as any of these. We can use phrases such as “It’s a bit like . . .” But in the end, we have to realize that the gospel transcends and transforms any and all cultural ideas we may use as channels for its communication. These are vehicles and channels for the gospel; they are not the gospel itself.

Second, apologetics runs the risk of creating the impression that showing the reasonableness of faith is all that is required. This is one of the reasons to emphasize the importance of evangelism. To use an analogy found in the writings of Martin Luther, faith is like getting into a boat and crossing the sea to an island. Apologetics can help establish that it is reasonable to believe there is a boat, that it is likely to be safe to travel in, and that there is an island just beyond the horizon. But you still need to get in the boat and travel to the island. Faith is about commitment to God, not just belief in God. Once more, this is a difficulty that can be avoided by realizing apologetics and evangelism are essential and interconnected partners in Christian outreach.

## Moving On

In this opening chapter, we have reflected on some basic themes of Christian apologetics. How are we to relate the Christian faith to contemporary culture? As we shall see at various points throughout this work, one of the best ways of doing this is to make sure we have really understood the Christian faith, and appreciated its intellectual, relational, aesthetic, imaginative, and ethical appeal. There is much to appreciate!

Yet we also need to reflect on the cultural context within which we proclaim, explain, and commend the gospel. People do not exist in cultural vacuums. They live in a specific situation, and often absorb at least some of its ideas and values. In the next chapter, we shall begin to reflect on the role played by culture in apologetics.

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# 2

## Apologetics and Contemporary Culture

FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

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**A**pologetics always takes place within a specific cultural context. Christian missionaries to China and India soon discovered that the apologetic methods that seemed to work well in western Europe did not seem to be effective in Asia. It was necessary to develop new approaches that resonated with the cultural mood and patterns of thought characteristic of these regions. An apologetic approach that was very productive in one context might prove much less effective, and perhaps even counterproductive, in a different cultural environment.

### Apologetics and Modernity

The dominant cultural environment of the West, from about 1750 to 1960, is usually defined as “modernity.” This outlook was shaped by a belief in a universal human reason, common to all people and times, capable of gaining access to the deeper structures of the world. Reason was the key that unlocked the mysteries of life, and argument was its tool of persuasion. Rational argument became the trusted tool of this cultural age. Christian apologists rapidly realized the importance of this development. The rational defense of the Christian faith became of paramount importance.

The types of apologetics Christian writers developed to engage modernity focused on demonstrating the logical and rational grounds of faith. True beliefs were based on correct assumptions, which were in turn based on rational rules of logic. Apologetics was thus primarily conceived as arguments based on logic, appealing to the human mind. While these approaches had many strengths, they nevertheless neglected the relational, imaginative, and existential aspects of faith. As we noted earlier, French philosopher and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal famously complained about this excessive focus on reason. What about the human heart? The heart had its own reasons for believing, he declared, which reason could not grasp.

One important result of the impact of rationalism on Christian apologetics was the downplaying of any aspects of Christian thought that were seen as “irrational” or “illogical”—such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Few eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Christian apologists defended this idea, believing it was something of a liability in the face of the hard rationalism dominating this age. The rediscovery of the theological importance of the doctrine of the Trinity and the birth of a new confidence in its foundations and coherence dates from after World War I, when the easy assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism had been dealt a significant blow by the irrationality of the First World War.

Yet Christian apologists generally responded well to the challenges of rationalism, and developed new approaches to apologetics that chimed in with the “spirit of the age.” This age produced some landmark works of apologetics. Edward John Carnell (1919–67) produced a work that became a classic evangelical reasoned defense of the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Yet the passing of time has made the continued use of such works problematic, for two reasons:

1. Each age generates its own specific concerns and critiques of the Christian faith. Many of the issues seen as important by Carnell and other apologists of this age now seem of little significance. Indeed, reading older works of apologetics often seems like a journey down memory lane, marked by the names of writers and controversies that no longer seem relevant.

2. Many apologists of modernity engaged their cultural context using approaches they believed would resonate with their audiences—such as an appeal to rational argument as the basis for a trustworthy faith. As we shall see, the hallmark of good apologetics is an ability to engage specific audiences. Yet the modernist assumption of the primacy of rationality has now been called into question, raising difficulties for apologetic approaches based upon or appealing to it.

One of the problems here is that rationalist approaches to apologetics tend to minimize the element of mystery within the Christian faith in order to make Christianity appear more accessible to reason. Yet the Christian gospel expresses some God-given ideas that lie far beyond the capacity of the human mind to discover by itself. In trying to win arguments with particular opponents, apologists sometimes buy into the assumptions of their adversaries. A tactical advantage can easily become a strategic liability. The danger of forms of apologetics that respond to rationalism is that they often end up importing rationalism into Christianity, rather than exporting the gospel into a rationalist culture.

## **The Rise of Postmodernity**

In the early twenty-first century, western Christianity faces a cultural context more complex and varied than that known by apologists in the middle of the twentieth century. Individuals and Christian communities live in a postmodern world. The apologetic approaches that seemed to work so well in the 1950s and early 1960s seem out of tune with the cultural mood of a later generation.

The term “postmodernism” first made its appearance around 1971. It was initially used to refer to a new architectural style, but was soon applied to the world of ideas. Postmodernism came to refer to the growing cultural belief that modernity had failed and needed to be corrected. This feeling initially focused on the failures of “modern art” to engage with the human imagination, but rapidly extended to social issues and problems arising from a naïve belief in the inevitability of progress—such as the growth of industrialization



and urbanization. It is important to note that this emerging movement did not choose to style itself “antimodernism.” Postmodernism is not a rejection of every aspect of modernity, but is seen by its advocates as an attempt to combine the best of the modern world with the best elements of classical traditions and eliminate the undesirable aspects of both.

Postmodernity has been severely criticized for its intellectual shallowness, especially its eclecticism. Who decides what we pick and mix from the past and the present? Postmodern authors, on the other hand, argue that the movement represents an attempt to move society and thought forward in a way that utilizes the best insights of the past but is not trapped by it. One of their main concerns is to fight the vast “totalizing schemes”—such as Marxism—that were so typical of modernity, and are now seen to constitute an intellectual and cultural straightjacket. As we shall see presently, this critique of such “uniformitarianism” is of major importance to Christian apologetics.

So how do we respond to this major cultural shift? Perhaps the first step is to get a sense of proportion about this development. Reflecting on the history of the church allows us to see this shift in its proper perspective. Every generation believes it stands at a critical point in history. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the early fifth century, remarked on how many people of his time longed for the good old days, when Christianity was given support and security by the Roman Empire. Bernard of Clairvaux, writing seven hundred years later, wrote of the sense of nostalgia many then felt for the time of Augustine. And many sixteenth-century writers commented on how much they longed to have lived at the time of Bernard of Clairvaux. Things were so much better then! We find it very easy to believe things were better in the past. We must remember that the past is easily idealized and romanticized, especially by those who feel alienated and displaced in the present.

Yet our task is not to be nostalgic about the past, but to deal with the challenges of the present, making use of past approaches to apologetics when they are helpful (as they so often are). Apologetics always takes place against a shifting cultural context. The gospel remains the same; the questions asked about it and the challenges it faces vary hugely from one cultural location to another. The

tide of modernism swept in and is now receding. Postmodernism now seems dominant. But in a generation's time, things may well seem very different.

There is no need for Christian apologists to be alarmed by the rise of postmodernity. The Christian faith possesses ample resources to meet this challenge. It's just that we haven't used some of them for generations, as they seemed inappropriate in a modernist worldview. The rise of postmodernity certainly brings some real challenges for Christian apologetics; yet it is clear that it brings some equally real opportunities. It is also clear that this new cultural mood offers challenges to churches in that it forces them to do some significant rethinking. Is this way of preaching the Christian gospel really the best way to do it? Is it too deeply embedded in an earlier worldview, so that it falls with modernity's passing?

For many younger western apologists, Christianity seems to have become deeply enmeshed within the plausibility structures of modernity, that great period in European cultural history regnant from about 1750 to 1960. The rise of postmodernism thus provides the occasion for a review of this development. What some older writers seem to regard as theologically necessary may simply turn out to have been culturally convenient or historically contingent.

So how are we to explain, defend, or communicate the Christian gospel in this changing cultural situation? While I believe postmodernism is actually quite difficult to defend and sustain intellectually, I nevertheless accept that it continues to shape cultural perceptions. We have to connect with where people are, not with where we think they ought to be. In any case, I also believe it gives us new opportunities to preach and communicate the gospel, as I hope to show.

Some older apologists seem to think the best way of proclaiming the gospel in a postmodern context is to try and get people to go back to modernity. This is neither right nor possible. In this book, I will neither defend nor criticize either modernity or postmodernity. I shall simply take them as cultural "givens" shaped by the happenstances of history, and assume it is evident that both have their points of strength and of vulnerability. Postmodernity certainly offers us some challenges—but I believe they are challenges to which churches can rise, and from which they may benefit.

## Apologetics and Postmodernity

So what are the core themes of this “postmodernism” of which we are speaking? It has become something of a sacred tradition to begin any reflections on how the church should live and witness in postmodernity with a detailed account of scholarly reflections on the historical emergence, philosophical roots, and cultural implications of postmodernism, sprinkled with judicious hints that the term is ultimately fluid and probably even elusive. Nevertheless, it is clear that something significant has happened in western culture during the last generation, even if its precise description remains hard to pin down.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of postmodernism is its rejection of what I shall call uniformitarianism—that is, the insistence that there is only one right way of thinking and only one right way of behaving. Postmodern writers see such attitudes as underlying Nazism and Stalinism, which they regard as the unacceptable public face of uniformitarianism. A demand for uniformity is held to lead to repression in that people are forced to fit into one single preconceived mold. To use the language of some leading postmodern philosophers, “the other” is relentlessly reduced to “the same.”

Postmodernism can be seen as a reaction against these ways of thinking, which it regards as oppressive. In their place, a cultural mood has developed that celebrates diversity and seeks to undermine those who offer rigid, restrictive, and oppressive views of the world. It reacts primarily against modernism, which tried to reduce everything to a uniform set of ideas. This is seen as an attempt to control and master other people, a form of intellectual or cultural Stalinism, characterized by its refusal to permit diversity in our readings of the world. Human freedom, it is suggested, is dependent upon successfully identifying, challenging, and ultimately subverting such controlling “metanarratives.”

Yet it is fair to point out that postmodernism has its own family of distinct metanarratives, which are far from being above criticism. Indeed, some of these metanarratives have become the regnant orthodoxy within at least certain sections of western culture, raising fundamental questions for those who disagree with the “big picture” of reality it proposes. For example, consider the relativist

who maintains that all points of view on a given topic are equally valid, even though they are apparently incompatible. This stance is ultimately grounded in an underlying understanding of reality (we might say a “narrative of reality” or metanarrative) that comes into clear and explicit conflict with other narratives of reality that regard reality as open, at least in principle, to public experience and discussion.

It is, in fact, not easy to give a definition of what postmodernity actually is. Its leading interpreters view it in quite different ways; indeed, some would say it is intrinsically and necessarily resistant to any form of definition. The best we can hope to do is to offer a description, or some kind of sketch, of postmodernity. In what follows, I shall draw on an illuminating and perceptive recent account of the leading themes of postmodernity from the pen of Kevin Vanhoozer, a leading evangelical theologian based at Wheaton College, Illinois.<sup>2</sup>

Vanhoozer suggests that the complex phenomenon of postmodernity can be summarized in terms of four criticisms it directs against older ways of thinking:

1. *Reason.* Vanhoozer notes that the modern approach of reasoning by argument is viewed with suspicion by postmodern writers. Where modernity believed in a single universal reason, postmodernity holds that there are many different kinds of rationality. “They deny the notion of universal rationality; reason is rather a contextual and relative affair.”
2. *Truth.* Postmodernity, Vanhoozer argues, is suspicious of the idea of truth because of the way in which it has been used to legitimate oppression, or give justification to vested interests. Truth, on this view, is “a compelling story told by persons in positions of power in order to perpetuate their way of seeing and organizing the natural and social world.”
3. *History.* Where modern writers tried to find universal patterns in history, Vanhoozer suggests that postmodernity is “incredulous towards narratives that purport to recount universal history.” From the standpoint of Christian apologetics, this means that any attempt to see universal significance in

the narrative of Jesus of Nazareth will be viewed with intense suspicion by some in today's culture.

4. *Self*. Following on from this, Vanhoozer notes how postmodernity rejects any notion there is “one true way of recounting one's own history” and thus concludes there is “no true way of narrating one's own identity.” All ways of understanding the individual are open-ended and partial. There is no universal answer to the question of human identity.

Vanhoozer's analysis is important, as it helps identify the stumbling blocks and suspicions some older approaches to Christian apologetics will encounter in postmodern contexts. Yet it is essential to appreciate two points:

1. Postmodernity must never be thought of as defining what is “right” or “true.” It is a cultural mood, shaped by certain values and beliefs. Like modernity, postmodernity is an essentially secular outlook, neither anti- nor pro-Christian. It simply describes a cultural context within which we must do apologetics.
2. Many of the approaches to apologetics that we describe as “traditional” are actually quite recent creations and represent responses to a modernist context. Apologists who wanted to engage modernity developed approaches specifically adapted to modernist assumptions—above all, the priority of reason.

We must realize we are free to develop apologetic approaches that are faithful to the Christian gospel on the one hand, and are adapted to our own cultural situation on the other. By doing this, we are repeating the method of “traditional apologetics” while responding to the changes in the cultural context toward which it is directed. We simply cannot use an apologetic approach developed to engage eighteenth-century rationalism to defend the faith to twenty-first-century people who regard rationalism as outdated and constricting!

For example, postmodernity finds appeals to rational argument problematic. But it is deeply attracted to stories and images. Furthermore, postmodernity is more interested in a truth that proves

itself capable of being lived out than being demonstrated by rational argument. This helps us understand why “incarnational apologetics,” which emphasizes the apologetic importance of faithful living, has become so influential in recent years. As will become clear in a later chapter, we can easily rise to this new challenge, usually not by inventing new approaches to apologetics, but by recovering older approaches that the rise of rationalism seemed to make obsolete.

As we shall see, the rise of postmodernity may change some of the approaches we adopt—but it does not invalidate the tasks or intellectual foundations of Christian apologetics. The fundamental principles remain what they always have been:

1. Understand the Christian gospel.
2. Understand the context within which you are doing apologetics.
3. Develop apologetic approaches that are faithful to the gospel and build on the “common ground” or “points of contact” with the cultural context.

### **The Approach Adopted in This Book**

There are many different ways of doing apologetics. Some books use a “case study” approach, considering a number of objections or difficulties concerning the Christian faith. Each of these is then examined, and answers are offered. Other books appeal to the historical or rational evidence for faith. Others suggest that the world simply cannot be understood without reference to God. This book does not reflect the approach of any school of apologetics, but aims to equip its users to think apologetically, drawing on the best apologetists to help explore the issues.

The basic approach of this book can be summarized in the following sequence of steps. Each of these will be explored in much greater detail later. At this stage, I am simply introducing them.

#### *1. Understand the faith.*

First, it is essential to have a good understanding of the Christian faith. This knowledge of the gospel, however, needs to be focused

apologetically. We need to reflect on how the leading themes of faith can connect with people and engage with their experiences and ideas. This means trying to adopt an “outsider perspective” on faith, asking how an unbeliever might respond to core aspects of the gospel instead of focusing on the kind of discussions Christians might have among themselves.

For example, a biblical scholar might ask: “How does the parable of the Prodigal Son help us understand the relation of Jesus of Nazareth to Judaism?” The apologist asks a rather different question: “How does this parable help us relate to the world of the unbeliever?” The apologist will want to explore how the ideas, narratives, and images of faith can engage with the realities of everyday life.

## *2. Understand the audience.*

Second, it is important to understand the audience being addressed. Who are they? My own experience is that audiences vary enormously—as they did in New Testament times. Compare the radically different approaches of Peter when addressing an audience of Jews (Acts 2) and Paul when addressing a Greek audience (Acts 17). The same gospel is commended and communicated in quite different ways, tailored to the worlds of those very different groups of people. Each audience has its own questions, objections, and difficulties that need to be engaged, just as it has its own “points of contact” and openings for faith.

To give some obvious examples: our audiences have huge variations in knowledge of the Christian faith. Some audiences have no knowledge of the Bible, and regard it as an irrelevance. Others retain a memory and affection for some biblical passages, such as Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Audiences have quite different cultural locations. Some have very modern perspectives; others are postmodern. Some love classic works of literature; others prefer to talk about the most recent shows on television. Some use very abstract ways of thinking; others think in terms of images or stories. In each case, we are forced to think about how we can best communicate the Christian faith in terms that will resonate with the experience and knowledge of our audience.

### 3. *Communicate with clarity.*

Third, we must translate our faith into a language that can be understood by our audiences. The great debates over biblical translation can help us here, as they focus our attention on the need to *communicate* its message to contemporary people. As C. S. Lewis wisely remarked: “Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow—Heb. 13:8) in the particular language of our own age.”<sup>3</sup> Our privilege and responsibility is to express the timeless truths of the gospel using language and imagery adapted to our audiences. The apologist is thus someone who translates the realities of faith into the cultural vernacular.

### 4. *Find points of contact.*

Fourth, we need to identify points of contact for the gospel that are already embedded in human culture and experience. God has not left himself without a witness in history, culture, or human experience (Acts 14:17). Our task is to try to identify that witness (whether in nature, society, or a moral code), and use it as a point of contact for the proclamation of the Christian gospel.

### 5. *Present the whole gospel.*

Fifth, we must make sure we do not impoverish the appeal of the Christian faith by restricting it to what we personally enjoy or find attractive. C. S. Lewis emphasized how the apologist must make a scrupulous distinction between the “Christian message” and “one’s own ideas.” If we fail to make this distinction, what is presented to our audiences is not the Christian gospel but those aspects of the gospel we happen to regard as important and interesting. For Lewis, the temptation to focus on what we personally like or approve simply impoverishes the gospel. We end up promoting ourselves—when we are meant to be promoting Christ.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Christian faith upon our lives is itself important apologetically. Why? Because it witnesses to the capacity of the gospel to transform existence. Lewis’s point is that we must avoid presenting Christianity simply in terms of our personal preferences and focus instead on identifying its capacity to



engage the deepest levels of human existence—our hearts, minds, and souls.

Nor must we needlessly inhibit the appeal of Christianity by limiting the means by which we communicate it. Many in western Christianity focus on its core ideas and see apologetics as the rational defense of Christian truth claims. Now let me make it clear that this is correct, as far as it goes. But this is not the whole truth. We need to go further, noticing how Scripture uses images, stories, and ideas to communicate its core message. For example, Jesus of Nazareth used parables to communicate the great themes of the kingdom of God. These stories were able to plant some core ideas in the minds of his audiences. How can we do the same today?

### *6. Practice, practice, practice.*

Sixth, apologetics is not just about theory; it's about practice. We need to be able to apply apologetic ideas and approaches in everyday life—in conversations, debates, interviews, or whatever interactions we have with other people. Apologetics is both a *science* and an *art*. It is not just about knowledge; it is about wisdom. It's like a skilled and experienced medical practitioner, who knows the theory of medicine well. But she has to apply it to her patients, and that means learning how to relate to them—how to help them tell her what the real problems are, finding ways of communicating technical medical terms in ordinary language, and explaining how they can be addressed.

These six themes will be explored throughout the following chapters, as we reflect on the great themes and approaches of Christian apologetics.

## Moving On

We have looked briefly at some initial questions concerning apologetics. The scene is set for a much fuller discussion that follows, where we will explore some of these themes in greater detail. We begin by considering the deep theological foundations on which Christian apologetics rests.

## For Further Reading

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