

## *Arbor Foundations*

26 – Apologetics: Earnestly Contending for the Faith

April 21, 2019 – Jon Evans

### **Key Ideas / Biblical Basis**

#### **1 Peter 3:13-17**

And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, **and always be ready to give a defense (apologian) to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you**, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

#### **Purposes of Apologetics:**

1. To demonstrate what is plainly declared in scripture, that man is without excuse for his unbelief. ([Romans 1:18-20](#))
2. To show unbelievers that the Christian faith is reasonable and does not require that the faithful abandon reason, logic, truth, etc.
3. To bolster the faith of Christians, who are prone to doubt or spiritual depression and/or surrounded by persuasive unbelief.

The central task of Christian Apologetics is to show that the Christian faith is:

1. Consistent with the world of observation.
2. Rationally and logically robust.

More Reading: <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/task-apologetics/>

#### **An important distinction:**

Apologetics is fundamentally about **showing** the Christian faith to be true, not about **knowing** that it is true. That is, no argument for the rationality of Christian belief can form the basis on which the truth of the faith is established. Rather, arguments in defense of the faith support or illuminate truths that are revealed by God, who is Himself the foundation in which the truth is grounded.

#### **Why this distinction?**

Ultimately, the *only* reason we believe at all is because the Spirit has renewed and transformed our hearts and minds, causing the blind to see the glory of Christ and the truth of the Gospel.

## Major Schools of Thought with Respect to Christian Apologetics:

1. **Evidential apologetics** or **evidentialism** is an approach to Christian apologetics emphasizing the use of evidence to demonstrate that God exists.
  - a. Defining characteristics
    - i. Claims that Christianity describes the world as it is.
    - ii. Places highest emphasis on matters of **fact**.
    - iii. Makes appeals to the best explanation of objective facts.
    - iv. Includes skepticism, which is the view that it is irrational to believe anything for which you lack sufficient evidence.
  - b. Strengths
    - i. Evidence *should* be belief-neutral. That is, both believer and nonbeliever share the same evidence.
    - ii. Does not presuppose God's existence.
    - iii. Lots of scriptural support!
      1. 2 Pet 1:16 is an *eyewitness* testimony trying to convince people of the truth of the gospel.
      2. Matthew, Mark, and John are *eyewitness* accounts.
      3. 1 John 4 tells us to *test* the spirits to see if they are from God.
      4. Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:2-40)
  - c. Weaknesses
    - i. Assumes the rationality of man (ignoring the fallenness of the mind) and the validity of induction (which can't be proved).
    - ii. Facts, sadly, do not change minds!
      1. The hardened heart of unbelief makes the mind soft.
      2. Only Christians are truly free to follow the evidence where it really points.
  - d. Proponents: B. B. Warfield, John Warwick Montgomery
2. **Classical apologetics** is a method of apologetics that begins by first employing various theistic arguments to establish the existence of God. Classical apologists will often utilize various forms of the cosmological, teleological (Design), ontological, and moral arguments to prove God's existence. Once God's existence has been established, the classical apologist will then move on to present *evidence* from fulfilled prophecy, the historical reliability of Scripture, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus to distinguish Christianity from all other forms of theism. <http://bit.ly/2VebGDP>
  - a. Defining Characteristics
    - i. Claims that Christianity is self consistent and rational
    - ii. Places highest emphasis on matters of **logic**
    - iii. Makes appeals to whether uniquely Christian claims are more likely true than not.

- b. Strengths
    - i. Does not presuppose God's existence.
  - c. Weaknesses
    - i. Provides strongest support for theism in general, rather than Christianity in particular.
    - ii. Assumes the rationality of man and the validity of induction.
  - d. Proponents: Thomas Aquinas, Norman Geisler, William L. Craig, J. P. Moreland, R.C. Sproul.
3. **Presuppositionalism** is “a school of Christian apologetics that believes the Christian faith is the *only* basis for rational thought. It presupposes that the Bible is divine revelation and attempts to expose flaws in other worldviews. It claims that apart from presuppositions, one could not make sense of any human experience, and there can be no set of neutral assumptions from which to reason with a non-Christian.” - Wikipedia
- a. Defining Characteristics
    - i. Clearly states that everyone starts with presuppositions (or axioms) about how to interpret the world.
    - ii. Seeks to show that any interpretation of the world apart from a Christian framework will inevitably lead to conclusions which are absurd.
  - b. Strengths
    - i. Certainty: The existence of God is an axiom of this method; it is thus beyond all debate.
  - c. Weaknesses
    - i. Circularity: Presupposes the existence of God to show that belief in God is the only rational way of viewing the world. That is, we can know God exists with certainty, because we must presuppose it in order to be rational at all.
    - ii. Does not seek to justify Christian belief *per se*, but to show there are no other contenders in the world of ideas.
  - d. Proponents: Greg Bahnsen, Cornelius van Til, John R. Frame.

**Is one of these approaches clearly better?**

Not obviously. What approach would you use if someone you speak with...

1. ...denies the divinity of Christ (Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.)?
2. ...thinks that belief in God is ludicrous?
3. ...rejects the Bible as un-historical?
4. ...thinks that faith is irrational?
5. ...thinks that science has shown that there is no God?
6. ...claims that hell is unjust?

The best approach to take will depend on the situation!

## **Narrow Focus: Does God Exist?**

### **Why address this question specifically?**

1. The contemporary culture openly questions whether God exists.
  - a. This trickles down to young people in our church!
2. I have personally wrestled with doubt about this issue a lot!
  - a. Doubt is not disbelief!
3. Hebrews 11:6 - And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God **must believe that he exists** and that he rewards those who seek him.

Note: Some believers will feel the need to see the Christian faith is logically consistent and comports with their observations of the material world more than others will. This is OK. So, if you don't feel the need to think through arguments in support of the Christian faith, your faith is not defective. All systems of belief start with axioms, and there is nothing defective about starting with the axiom that the Christian faith is true. Belief in God is properly basic!

<https://youtu.be/5AINrvqr-Is>

## **How do you know it? or Where does your confidence come from?**

God has revealed Himself:

1. In the external world (General Revelation)
  - a. Romans 1:18-20 - For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse...
  - b. Psalm 19:1-3 - The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
2. In our internal perception of Him (Sensus Divinitatis)
  - a. "That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [*sensus divinitatis*], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending

ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead...this is not a doctrine which is first learned at school, but one as to which every man is, from the womb, his own master; one which nature herself allows no individual to forget.”

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

- b. “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you.” - St. Augustine of Hippo
  - c. The *sensus divinitatis* is like any of your other senses; when it works properly, your perception provides evidence on which to form beliefs in proportion to that evidence.
3. In the Scriptures
    - a. The *entire* Bible is aimed at teaching man about God.
    - b. Luke 24: Then He [Jesus] said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the *Scriptures*.
  4. In the person of Jesus Christ
    - a. The Father is revealed in Jesus (see John 14:1-11)
    - b. Hebrews 1:1-2 - God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...
  5. In the ministry of the Holy Spirit
    - a. Romans 8:16 - The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...
    - b. 1 Corinthians 1:9-13 - But as it is written, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God....Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches...
  6. In the testimony of Christians
    - a. 1 Peter 2:11-12 - Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.
    - b. Matthew 5:16 - Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

## **How can you show it? or Is belief in God justified?**

### **The evidentialist approach:**

Belief in God makes the best sense of the evidence.

1. Arguments from the fact of a Cosmic Beginning
  - a. **Everything we know** from the field of physics about the universe we live in points to the undeniable conclusion that the universe **began** to exist a **finite** time ago in the past.
    - i. Solutions to Einstein’s field equations of General Relativity
    - ii. Observational astronomy/cosmology confirms an absolute beginning of the universe!
  - b. This argument is based in what we know, not in our ignorance!
  - c. The Kalam Cosmological Argument
    - i. Formulating the argument
      1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
      2. The universe began to exist.
      3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
        - a. That cause must transcend the universe itself!
    - ii. Watch it! <https://youtu.be/6CulBuMCLg0>
    - iii. Read more: <http://bit.ly/2VaxPTQ>
2. Fine tuning arguments
  - a. Physicists have been surprised to learn that the range of physical constants which arise in physical laws have an extremely narrow life-permitting range, which suggests that a conscious agent is responsible for setting these constants to be life permitting.
    - i. The probability that this would occur by chance is incomprehensibly small.
  - b. Watch it! <https://youtu.be/EE76nwimuT0>
3. Historical arguments
  - a. Fulfilled prophecy
  - b. Biblical archeology
  - c. The historicity of the Gospels
    - i. Jesus’ resurrection
      1. The **fact** of the empty tomb of Jesus is best explained by God’s having raised him from the dead.
      2. Read More
        - a. <http://bit.ly/2ULrazW>
        - b. <http://bit.ly/2ZmxaOi>

4. Explicability Arguments
  - a. The laws of physics seem to have been written in the language of mathematics, which is, apparently, the output of the human mind. Why should the universe be explicable in terms comprehensible to the mind, unless mind is more fundamental than matter?
  - b. God is the best explanation of the applicability of mathematics to the physical world.
    - i. Watch it!: <https://youtu.be/BF25AA4dgGg>

Bottom Line: Belief in God is rational, logically robust, and intellectually satisfying.

### **The classical approach:**

#### Characteristics of a Good Argument

1. The starting premises are true (a deductive argument) or at least probably true (an inductive argument).
2. The conclusion *follows* logically from the premises and avoids logical fallacies.

#### Logical arguments for the existence of God:

1. The Cosmological Argument
  - a. See The Kalam Cosmological Argument (1.c on page 6).
2. The Ontological Argument
  - a. Seeks to establish that God not only exists, but exists necessarily; that is, it is logically impossible that He not exist, and that no possible version of the way the world might be could exclude His existence
  - b. Argues that, if it is possible that God exists, then God *does* exist.
    - i. Watch it: <https://youtu.be/xBmAKCvWI74>
  - c. Its true power: it requires a committed atheist to claim, not that God *does* not exist, but that God *can* not exist, a burden of proof that no one has been able to shoulder.
3. The Teleological Argument (or The Argument from Design)
  - a. Design, order, and purpose are apparent in creation
    - i. These point us to God
      1. (God has intended them to point us to Him!)
      2. Paley’s Analogy: the apparent design of the universe points us to God the way the apparent design of a watch points us to the watchmaker.
    - ii. Watch it: <https://youtu.be/yCGadbs4NcQ>
  - b. Formalizing the argument
    - i. Design is apparent in the cosmos.
    - ii. Design is the product of a mind.
    - iii. Therefore the universe is the product of a mind.

- c. Despite the pronouncements of internet infidels, new atheists, etc., contemporary science has not weakened the argument from design. On the contrary, we now know so much, that denial of design is *irrational*.
- 4. The Moral Argument
  - a. Right and wrong are *arbitrary* in the absence of an objective standard
  - b. Formalizing the argument
    - i. If God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist.
    - ii. Objective moral values and duties *do* exist,
    - iii. Therefore, God exists.
  - c. Watch it: <https://youtu.be/OxiAikEk2vU>
- 5. More Arguments
  - a. The Argument from Contingency
  - b. The Argument from Beauty
  - c. The Argument from Meaning
  - d. etc.

Beyond Mere Logic:

- 1. The nature of cumulative probability:
  - a. Each of the above arguments seeks to establish an *inductive* case that it is more reasonable to believe that God exists than to deny it.
  - b. In the absence of *proof*, the cumulative force of so many arguments of this kind provides a powerful argument in its own right.
  - c. In this way, the gathering of evidence, its examination, and the aggregate picture it paints is reminiscent of a court hearing to reconstruct the facts of a case.
- 2. Faith then, is not a *blind* leap at all! Rather, faith is trusting that which you have *good reason(s)* to believe is true.
- 3. Proponents of Classical Apologetics acknowledge that unaided logic, even if it does compel you to believe that God exists, does not compel you to believe in God as He has revealed himself in the Bible. To move beyond arguments for mere theism to Christianity, they rely on:
  - a. Natural evidence (that which can be observed).
  - b. Scriptural evidence (either defended as true, or assumed to be true).

Once again: Belief in God is rational, logically robust, and intellectually satisfying. The Christian faith is *not* credibly accused of being intellectually lacking. Claims to the contrary are based in *ignorance*, not knowledge.

A warning: If you earnestly contend for the faith this way, you will be mocked. If you are, speak confidently, Why? Because mockery is the last resort of someone who has no substantive counter-argument to offer.

**The presuppositional approach:**

1. Central claim: Everyone views the world view through the lens of presupposed axioms. Due to the fall, commitment to these (often *unexamined*, often *false*) axioms is so strong that observational fact and logical argument to the contrary rarely overturn them.
  - a. Critique of Evidential Apologetics:
    - i. FACTS DO NOT CHANGE MINDS.
      1. Luke 16:31 - But he [Abraham] said to him [the rich man], 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'
      2. Dead men DO bleed! (<http://bit.ly/2VYR2F1>)
  - b. Critique of Classical Apologetics:
    - i. Unbelievers and believers will not share the same axioms.
    - ii. The effects of the fall prevent unbelievers from using their rational faculties to arrive at the truth about God.
      1. Put another way, only minds which are regenerated by the Holy Spirit are free to follow evidence and logic to the conclusion to which they really point, so logical arguments are not likely to be convincing.
2. Believers start with the presupposition that God exists and that He has revealed Himself truthfully in the world in general and in the Scriptures in particular.
  - a. Belief in God is the only way to avoid embracing the absurd.
  - b. Belief in God is the only rational basis for logic. Conversely, an unbeliever's worldview prevents him/her from having any justification for methods of logic (such as induction) or even for trusting his/her senses.
  - c. Those who argue against the existence of God, therefore assume that He does in order to argue otherwise.
3. Intellectual theft:
  - a. Unbelievers hold beliefs which are not compatible with their presuppositions. Many of these are basically stolen from a Christian worldview. For example:
    - i. Oppression is wrong.
      1. Most unbelievers will condemn the Holocaust, but they only do so because the belief that it is wrong to slaughter people is simply *imported* from the Christian worldview without justification.
    - ii. Justice is good.
      1. Why assume that? What basis, on atheism, would be sufficient to compel me to believe this?
      2. Humanitarianism has been driven by Christians.
      3. Atheistic regimes explicitly deny human rights:

- a. eg. Soviet Russia, Communist China, North Korea, Nazi Germany
- iii. Human flourishing is good.
  - 1. Why think that? Perhaps humans are a blight on the planet and should be exterminated. The unbeliever has no warrant to choose one over the other. That choice is arbitrary!
- iv. Science is worthwhile.
  - 1. Why assume that nature is rationally understandable rather than chaotic or capriciously random?
  - 2. That is why science, historically, came out of Christian contexts and early scientists were strong believers
    - a. Isaac Newton
    - b. Gregor Mendel
    - c. Michael Faraday
    - d. Gottfried Leibniz
  - 3. It is unbelief, not faith, that is in conflict with science.
    - a. See *Where the Conflict Really Lies* by Alvin Plantinga
- b. If an unbeliever assumes such positions, that is good! Celebrate it, but call them on it!
- 4. Technique: The method of Presuppositional Apologetics is to ask questions.
  - a. Establish the position: “What do you believe?”
  - b. Find the grounding: “How do you know that?”
  - c. Assume this grounding, then show that the system of beliefs is incoherent. That is, that the grounding doesn’t support the belief.
    - i. **The principle of deductive explosion.** Showing a system of beliefs to be incoherent is more devastating than most people realize. A system of beliefs which includes a contradiction can be used to prove *any* statement, whether it be true or false. Such systems are thus obviously invalid.
      - 1. Read more: <http://bit.ly/2ZodhX3>
    - ii. An example: Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (<http://bit.ly/2PkwCE2>)
      - 1. Evolution is often invoked to support atheism, but actually, these two are in direct conflict. Taken together, they give us powerful reasons to doubt the reliability of our minds for forming true beliefs, including beliefs like naturalism.
  - d. Alternatively, show that reasoning from that starting point leads inexorably to conclusions which are absurd.
    - i. *Reductio ad absurdum* (<http://bit.ly/2XtXlRe>)
    - ii. Jesus uses a similar technique to silence the Pharisees in Matthew 12 (<http://bit.ly/2UxYGVb>)

- e. If you ask enough questions, you *will* find contradictions and absurdities because, ultimately, people must choose between only two options, God and absurdity:

*I do not regard true philosophical atheism as an intellectually valid or even cogent position; in fact, I see it as a fundamentally irrational view of reality, which can be sustained only by a tragic absence of curiosity or a fervently resolute will to believe the absurd. More simply, I am convinced that the case for belief in God is inductively so much stronger than the case for unbelief that true philosophical atheism must be regarded as a superstition, often nurtured by an infantile wish to live in a world proportionate to one's hopes or conceptual limitations... [and is] ultimately indistinguishable from purely magical thinking."*

- David Bentley Hart

You do not have to be well learned to be wise; God's Spirit will make you wiser than the most erudite unbeliever:

*I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts.*

- Psalm 119: 99-100

### **Better Together? or Wholistic Apologetics**

1. Some apologists see one school as obviously superior to the others. In my view, each has something to offer. The presuppositional approach is helpful for developing a framework within which believers are justified using our mental faculties to explore ideas.
2. Working within this framework, appeals to evidence and the work of logical inference can be fruitful:
  - a. For helping believers in seasons of doubt.
  - b. For answering intellectual objections of unbelievers, lest they go unchallenged and assume they are justified in their unbelief.
3. Since we believe that the Spirit must draw an unbeliever and transform his/her mind in order for them to see the truth, we can trust God to do that work as we present solid evidence and good arguments that God exists and that He has revealed himself in the Bible.
  - a. If the person you are discussing the faith with accepts the Bible (Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Muslim, etc.), reason from the Scriptures to faith in Christ.
  - b. If he/she does not accept the Bible, reason *to* the scriptures. Starting *with* the scriptures is likely to stall conversation.
4. A wholistic apologetic will also enable the believer to deal with objections such as The Problem of Evil and Suffering (<http://bit.ly/2VdvhUH>)

## **So What?**

God commands us to defend the faith, and he has equipped us with the tools for the task. The arguments and perspectives above are useful for countering claims that Christianity is based in ignorance or that Christians are Christians because they are unable to use their brains.

God has revealed Himself in nature and in Scripture, and we have solid tools to contend for the faith with unbelievers as well as to answer doubts that arise from within ourselves.

Someday, *everyone* you know will be a theist (Philippians 2:10-11). God uses means to produce conviction in the hearts of unbelievers and to bring them to Himself. Your apologetic may be the means God uses to overcome intellectual barriers to genuine belief in the life of someone you know.

## **For Further Study**

William Lane Craig, *On Guard!, Reasonable Faith*

Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*

[www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org)

<https://www.rzim.org/read/just-thinking-magazine/the-heart-of-apologetics>