

## Engaging In Apologetics Ministry

Practical Ideas For Growing An Effective Ministry Of Reaching Unbelievers

The Christian faith is under more intense attack than it has been for many centuries, foreshadowing a shift to not only a post-Christian culture, but an anti-Christian culture. Attacks on the Bible from history, science, philosophy, and psychology have not only increased in recent years, but have been very successful in stunting biblical Christianity's growth. What are Christians to do? The answer is: apologetics.

Apologetics comes from the Greek word "apologia," which means "to make a defense." Apologetics is the process of defending one's beliefs against critics and giving reasonable answers to those who are seeking truth. Thus, apologetics has a twofold ministry. When going on the offense, apologetics seeks to show the inconsistencies of the beliefs of others. For instance, apologetics shows that naturalism and materialism have no ultimate foundation for the logic they claim to use. Apologetics also shows the Hindu that there is no evidence that any of his claims are true.

The second function is defensive, showing that the claims of the Christian faith are indeed reasonable and reliable. Apologetics shows, for instance, that there is good historical evidence that Jesus was who He said He was, that the Old and New Testaments were reliably translated and transmitted, that belief in God is not incompatible with the evil that we see in the world, and that the book of Genesis makes good sense of the majority of the data we see from the natural sciences.

But why does this discipline matter? Apologetics is important, first of all, because God commands us to do it and obedience to Him is very important. After all, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 teaches Christians that the whole reason Christ died for us was so that we would no longer live for ourselves but for Him. In several places in the Bible, especially the New Testament, apologetics is commanded. In 1 Peter 3:15, which is the most well-known apologetics verse (and for good reason), Peter writes that Christians are to,

"sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."<sup>1</sup>

As those who submit to Jesus as Lord, we have been charged by our Master to defend our faith. But the rest of the verse is important as well. We are charged to do so by making a defense to those who ask us a reason for our hope. This assumes that we are living in such a way that makes people see our hope. Further, we are not to defend the faith in an angry, argumentative way. We are to treat others with gentleness and respect because we represent our Lord.

Of course, the classic commissioning verse of the Bible is Matthew 28:19-20, in which Jesus commands His followers to,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We are required to evangelize and disciple the world. Part of doing this mission, making disciples, is showing people that the faith is worth believing.

Second, apologetics is important because it feeds our souls. When we see that our faith is worth believing, we are given more confidence. But apologetics is not simply for unbelievers. It is a way of strengthening the faith of believers who all, at some time or another, experience feelings of doubt.

Third, apologetics is important because God uses it to impact the lives of others. The fact is, though it is an unpleasant fact that we often dismiss out of either guilt, apathy, or fear, people will die someday and will spend eternity in either Heaven or Hell. Our neighbors, our friends, and our families all have an eternal destiny that will be decided by what they do with Jesus now. "But," it is objected, "apologetics cannot save anyone! Only the Holy Spirit can give new life!" While it is true that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate cause of salvation, Romans 10:9-17 is very clear that God uses the preaching of the word to bring new life through the Spirit. Apologetics, showing God's Word is true, is the preaching of the Word. Apologetics aids in the evangelistic effort by taking away the excuses of the skeptics as to why they refuse to believe. The Bible itself teaches, in Romans 1:17-20, that the evidence for God is all around us, yet, because of sin, we suppress that truth. Apologetics demonstrates to the unbeliever that there are no good reasons to reject the faith and that the faith is worth trusting.

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960,1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

### Apologetics And The Local Church

Apologetics is an important aspect of ministry. But a further question remains: is apologetics a ministry endowed simply to individuals? There are many talented and gifted men and women around the world and in church history who have been used by God to speak, debate, and write in defense of the faith. The book of Acts records men like Paul, Peter, Stephen, Apollos, and others who stood publically debated non-Christians in the first century. In our modern period, there are men and women like William Lane Craig, Ravi Zacharias, Norman Geisler, Greg Bahnsen, Mary Jo Sharp, Jason Lisle, and many, many more who make it their life's aim to show that Christianity is not only rational, but is worth trusting. But is apologetics a ministry meant only for the professional apologists? Are only the people with Ph.D.s or Master's degrees in history, philosophy, science, or theology equipped to do apologetics?

Interestingly, this question was asked about another field, psychology, decades ago. Are only secular psychologists and psychiatrists and licensed mental health counselors able to help people with their struggles? A man by the name of Jay Adams answered this question with Scripture and an emphatic "NO!" He reminded the church, from Romans 15:14, that believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, armed with the Word of God and prayer, and living in redemptive community are "Competent to Counsel"<sup>2</sup> each other. That does not mean that advanced training is unhelpful. But it does mean that counseling is not meant as simply a job for the professional, but as a vital ministry of the body of Christ to encourage and challenge one another.

The same is true with apologetics. This is not simply a function of the professional, but of the soldier of Christ. To be sure, some have more giftedness and training than others. But all are called to be ambassadors of Christ, as in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20,

"Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

<sup>2</sup> Adams, Jay E. *Competent To Counsel*. Zondervan Publishers, 1986.

Apologetics is just as much a function of the local church as any other Christian ministry, be it evangelism, social justice, preaching, counseling, worship music, fellowship, or discipleship. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul, writing to encourage the Ephesians to see their salvation not as an individualistic experience, but as an experience meant to bring them into fellowship and service with the community of faith, writes in verses 11-16,

"And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

While God gifts certain men and women with certain ministry roles and relationships, such as the early apostles and those who are especially gifted in evangelism or teaching, He also calls all men and women to engage in the work of the ministry, comparing the church to the body and how each part of the body is designed to complement the others for the building up of itself. Apologetics is a function of the local church in the same way that any other ministry is a function of the local church. Its aim is to produce Christians who are faithful and fruitful members of the body. Any apologetics endeavor which does not have this aim walks in stark contrast and disobedience to the revealed will of God to build His church, as per Matthew 16:18.

Why then, do many reject the idea that apologetics ought to be a vital part of the ministry of the local church? I believe there are two primary reasons apologetics is often not seen as a function of the local church. First, a vast majority of Christians do not share their faith regularly, for shame! Many are not interested in doing apologetics in the church because they are not being asked questions for which they desire answers.

Second, many Christians are afraid to engage in apologetics, fearing it is too technical or too intense for their participation. They hear words like “apologetics” and mentally shut down because, much like systematic theology, it seems like a discipline separated from their own lives and abilities.

Third, apologetics is seen as a ministry separate from the other ministries of the local church. Many view apologetics much like one might view departments in a store such as Wal-Mart. In one aisle, a shopper may find shoes, while in another aisle, one might find electronics or food. Similarly, apologetics is seen as a ministry to be added to the programs of the local church. However, apologetics is not a standalone ministry so much as it is an aspect of other ministries. This will be seen as we examine how to incorporate apologetics into our outreach, our preaching, and our counseling and discipleship ministries.

#### Apologetics In Outreach

Of all the ministries most associated with apologetics, outreach is the most obvious and natural. This is because outreach, by its very nature, aims to see people who are not Christians become Christians. This is where apologetics often shines. Though it happens, the experience of a person who hears that Jesus died for them and instantly repents and believes is rare. Rather, the people to whom we minister often raise questions and objections to the faith. Apologetics answers those questions. Though apologetics cannot save people, apologetics can remove barriers and excuses that keep a person from belief.

Apologetics is not something above and beyond ministry, as if one does AWANA, a food drive, handing out tracts, and apologetics. It is something that is incorporated into the fabric of every outreach ministry. There are several practical ways to incorporate apologetics into the outreach focus of the local church. First, when we have opportunities to share our faith, we often try to ram the Gospel through the conversation, appearing calloused and indifferent to the specific needs of the person to whom we speak, whether that person is a child on Wednesday night, or a person who is being served in a soup kitchen, or an antagonistic man at the door. Apologetics, however, leads us to ask questions rather than shove answers. Apologetics in outreach starts with asking the person to whom we speak what they believe. It takes an interest in understanding the beliefs, background, values, and commitments of the person in front of us. Asking questions such as, “What do you think about this particular issue and what makes you think that way?” “Do you think all people should think the way you do about this?”

“Who do you think Jesus was?” “Do you think we can trust the Bible?” “How do you think science and faith relate?” “Do you think God is a God who is loving and just?” Apologetics leads us to tailor our Gospel presentation to the needs of people. Once we have listened to people and have understood their worldviews, we are able to present Christ in a way that demonstrates sensitivity and relevancy.

Second, we can incorporate apologetics by giving answers to the questions people ask of us, whether this be curious children, the homeless man who asks why we would give up a Saturday to give him a blanket, or person on the street who just received a gospel tract who wants to know why this message is worth believing. Apologetics leads us to show the people we are trying to reach that Christianity provides good reasons to trust Jesus. There are good reasons to believe Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is reliable, that evolution isn’t all it is cracked up to be, and so on. We can show people, through giving positive evidence for the faith, that they too should become Christians.

Third, on a more organizational level, one can incorporate apologetics into outreach by teaching those who will be doing the outreach the information necessary to engage the ideas they will encounter. Hold classes, invite special speakers, have more experienced and knowledgeable people disciple the less experienced by taking them with them to apologetic encounters. Apologetics truly can be incorporated naturally into existing outreach efforts, adding a new level of depth, insight, and helpfulness to leading people to Christ.

#### Apologetics In Preaching

Preaching is another important ministry in the local church. This is true biblically and pragmatically as well. Biblically, there are numerous exhortations in the Bible, especially the New Testament, to pastors to be involved in preaching. For example, in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul writes to his son in the faith Timothy,

“I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

God demands that His church be taught through the public exhortation of the Word. But what is the aim of preaching? Is it simply to give information? Certainly not! Preaching has as its aim the implantation of the Word with a goal towards motivation to obey. Preaching attempts to show

people what God says, why they should do it, how to do, and then challenges them to do it. Apologetics answers the why questions. The people who sit under the preaching of the Word week in and week out and the people who come only at Christmas and Easter all have at least one question in mind: “Why should I give up what I am living for to live for what God says?” Apologetics demonstrates, on a foundational level, that the message God says is true.

But if apologetics is part of the preaching responsibility, how can pastors incorporate it into preaching? There are many ways to do so. First, the pastor can preach a series on apologetics. Advertising in the local papers and in church bulletins can generate interest that the pastor will be attempting to show why Christians should trust their Bibles and why skeptics should give it another shot. However, a word of caution is appropriate. A series aimed at apologetics should also be aimed at giving answers to questions that the people are actually asking. Making one message in the series about the epistemological problem of infinite regress will most likely not be helpful. Rather, the series should be tailored to the world in which the listeners live, giving them answers to the questions they often encounter.

A second way of incorporating apologetics into preaching is to take every opportunity possible to insert apologetics into any teaching series. As a preacher preaches through a book, a topic, a doctrine, whatever the case may be, he should constantly include in the message comments about why we can trust what God calls us to do. For example, when preaching through Matthew and arriving at the passages about the death and resurrection of Christ, the pastor can incorporate some corroborating evidence from history for the historical Jesus. Or, when preaching through Acts, the pastor can briefly comment on the historical corroboration of the events, people, and places of the accounts. Even in the Old Testament, science and archaeology can be used as the pastor preaches through Genesis and the flood to confirm what the Bible teaches. Often, the comments can be simple one-liners such as, “I know this seems like a stretch to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but the facts surrounding the resurrection are abundantly supplied by even non-Christian sources.” But sometimes, it may be necessary to include a whole point in the sermon or whole sermon in a series to talk about why we can trust what we are reading. This approach gives motivation to the believer and shows respect and sympathy for the intellect of the skeptic as well.

A third way, though more indirect than direct, is to preach in such a way as to not push apologetic opportunities away unnecessarily. Often, preachers demean, disrespect, and dismiss the objections of

skeptics and those who struggle with doubt with jokes, straw man portrayals, and pseudo-logic. Rather, preachers should always treat listeners with gentleness and respect so that those who wish to engage in the realm of ideas feel free and welcomed to do so.

### Apologetics In Counseling

Most often, apologetics is associated with evangelism. Apologetics is seen as simply a tool to bring unbelievers to faith. But this is not the only aspect of apologetics to be seen in the church and it is certainly not the only aspect of apologetics to be seen in the Bible. Most of those in the Biblical accounts who doubted were believers. We might call this aspect “pastoral apologetics” Pastoral apologetics seeks to help struggling believers to not only believe their faith with confidence, but to walk by faith as well in full obedience.

There are many reasons that counselees and those who seek pastoral help with faith may doubt. It could be that they heard something on the history channel or TIME magazine that made them question some factual aspect of their faith. It could be that, due to some tragedy in their lives, the God they believe in seems to not care or not be able to help. Even still, sometimes the counselor must call counselees to do hard things, such as love an adulterous spouse, or confess to a lie they told their boss, or to seek forgiveness for a harsh word said, or even to say “no” to a lustful behavior, and the counselee will struggle to obey, afraid that obedience will result in being “let down” by God. These struggles are all apologetic struggles.

When ministering to believers in personal settings, whether in formal counseling, late night personal conversations, or even small group settings, counselors can incorporate apologetics by constantly calling counselees to focus on the truth of the faith, rather than the fleeting emotions and passions of the moment or season. After all, Paul himself encouraged the Philippians in Philippians 4:8 to think only on those things that are, “true...honorable...pure...” and so on. Studying passages of Scripture, assigning homework and verse memorizations, and giving factual answers that demonstrate God’s existence, nature, character, and works can be just as reassuring and beneficial for believers as it is for unbelievers.

When one considers the ministry of apologetics, it is tempting to think of apologetics as a ministry best left to the professionals. But apologetics is a vital aspect of the ministry of the body and is an aspect that can be easily incorporated into the ministry focus of each individual local church to the glory of God and the good of His people.

### Apologetics As Specialized Ministry

While this article has thus far focused on how apologetics should be incorporated into local church ministry, this is not to say that apologetics cannot be the focus of a specialized ministry or of a parachurch ministry. Much good has come from men and women who have given their lives to the pursuit of defending the faith. But how would one engage and build this type of a ministry?

First, professional apologists should work hard to maintain personal standards of godliness. After all, what good is proclaiming a saving message of hope if the person sharing it obviously hasn't experienced such hope themselves. It is like a salesman that hopes to convince someone to try their product but has never used it themselves. That is why Peter began his challenge in 1 Peter 3:15 with the words, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts..."

Second, while a certain level of professional schooling is not necessary for doing personal apologetics, it is extremely helpful for professional ministry. The person wishing to do so should have a solid biblical education, but should also specialize in some particular area of apologetics. The struggle with apologetics is that there is such a big field to pool from (such as science, history, archaeology, psychology, philosophy, theology, etc.) that the person with a generic apologetics background is a jack of all trades but master of none. It is far better to, after gaining advanced familiarity with the various aspects of apologetics, to gain specialization in one particular area, gaining graduate and even doctoral training in understand the field and teaching it.

Third, because it is helpful to specialize in a particular field, professional apologists would be wise to band together with specialists from other fields as well, forming a team mentality. For instance, if a particular person is a Ph.D. level apologist of philosophy, he or she would be wise to join together with a Ph.D. astrophysicist or biologist, or historian, or text critic. This helps an apologetics ministry to be well-rounded and helps it to avoid weak spots.

Fourth, professional apologetics ministries should focus their time and energy on training others to do apologetics, rather than enlarging the stigmatism that apologetics is only for the professional. This is because an apologist may be very good at giving answers to the faith, but if he cannot teach others to do the same, what will happen to the ministry when he is gone? Professional apologists should not only interact with the best arguments and individuals of other worldviews, but they should seek to provide the church with the tools and opportunities to learn and grow as well.

Fifth, one of the greatest dangers of parachurch ministries is for the ministry workers to divorce themselves of dependence upon the local church. Not only are these ministries supposed to train and empower the local church, but they should be led by people who believe in, love, and submit to the local church. Each individual apologist should be regularly attending and serving in a local church and each ministry should have a local church or group of local churches to serve as accountability and prayer partners. It was James White, arguably one of the most well known and frequent Christian debaters who once said,

"The biggest problem with apologists in the United States today is that they are not a part of the local church. If you are going to do apologetics, I tell you right now on the authority of Hebrews 13:17 you had better be in a church ministering the word of God regularly and under the authority elders, if you are not an elder yourself, or you do not belong out there!"<sup>3</sup>

This article has attempted to help apologetics students think through how to best engage in the ministry of apologetics, either through the local church, or through professional discipline as well, by providing a starting point for church leaders to consider how best to impact people for the kingdom of Christ. To God be the glory!

<sup>3</sup> White, James. *The Biggest Problem With Apologists In The United States*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0q4uxSZvDQ>