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WHY DO WE NEED APOLOGETICS?

Always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks. . . .

1 Peter 3:15

MY STORY

I dared to take “Introduction to Philosophy” my first semester of college. The first day the professor began class by asking a question: “How many of you believe in God?” Of about two hundred of us, only half raised a hand. Then the professor declared his intention for the course: “I hope that by the end of the semester, all of you will see there is no reason to believe in God.” As we studied the traditional arguments for the existence of God, I began to realize that all of them could be questioned, and my faith began to wobble. When I talked with my brother, who was in the same class, neither of us dared to say exactly what we were thinking, and we would usually end our conversations with a half-hearted attempt to cover up our doubts by saying, “Well, I guess you just believe by faith.” I took walks to think about it all: Does God really exist, or did everything develop through an

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evolutionary process? I tried it backwards also: Suppose God doesn't exist? Can you prove that he doesn't? If he doesn't exist, why should I be good instead of bad? Why am I here, anyway? I began to view my life as a page of scribbled, disorderly class notes with no heading.

One night on campus, I decided to lie down on the grass and look at the stars. There were thousands of them, sparkling like diamonds, and I sensed the endlessness of the universe as well as my smallness. Suddenly, I knew God was there. I began to pray and said, "Lord, I can't prove it with arguments, but I know you are there. Do whatever it takes to get me back on the right road." I felt like a derailed train that had been given a supernatural shove to put it back on the tracks. I walked home that night with a sense of joy and peace that I had never felt before. Not only did I know God was there, I knew God!

During the next two years, I seemed to be doing fine and growing spiritually stronger. My pastor taught me to study the Bible and to share my faith. Then I went to Germany for a junior year abroad program. There I had little Christian fellowship and troubling conversations with Jehovah's Witnesses. They made me doubt the divinity of Jesus. Furthermore, my brother had never recovered from the struggles of the philosophy class. In his letters, he was challenging my faith in the Bible. When I returned to the United States for my last year of college, I told my pastor I still was a Christian but that I wasn't sure about the Bible or the divinity of Jesus. He would read from the Bible to show that it was inspired, but I told him he was using a circular argument. How could he use the Bible to prove the Bible?

I knew that I was heading down a dark alley with no escape, and it was frightening. I was using Descartes' method of only accepting what I could not doubt. I still believed in God and would say to myself, "OK, God exists. Now what other truth

can I build on that foundation?” But I was getting nowhere! I couldn’t put any new bricks on top of the first one. In my spiritual pilgrimage, I began to read books by C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer, whose book *The God Who Is There* was especially helpful. It helped me realize there were intelligent Christians who were trying to answer questions like the ones I had. I liked what Schaeffer had—a complete and coherent system of truth that was based on the Bible. I decided that truth was not something to build, one piece at a time, but a complete package of truths that stand or fall together. I wasn’t totally convinced yet, but at least I *wanted* to believe in the Bible.

I decided to go to seminary. I couldn’t go on without some important answers. I had seen some books by Cornelius Van Til, and I wanted to study where he was teaching. When I visited Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, one of the students told me that his studies with Van Til had made him so sure of his faith that he would be willing to talk to anyone about the gospel, even the most intelligent philosopher on earth! I thought to myself, “Wow! That’s the way I want to feel!”

I confess that my first classes with Van Til were disappointing. He seemed old, and he repeated himself a lot. Every day he would draw two circles on the chalkboard—one to represent God and the other to represent the creation. Finally, I realized why he was repeating himself so much. It wasn’t because he was so old but because we had to hear his basic points ten times to begin to understand them! His explanation of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden definitely broke through my stubborn heart and mind. He said, here they were, mere creatures of the almighty Sovereign God, asking themselves, “I wonder . . . I wonder . . . I wonder if God is right, or if this serpent is right!” They had no right to question God! Who did they think they were! This was the beginning of the fall. It was their arrogant pretension that

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they could set themselves up as judges of the truth, even over God himself, that wrecked everything. “Wow! That’s exactly what I am doing,” I thought to myself. Who am I to wonder if God’s Word is true? By what standard do I judge him? Again, instead of finding a clever argument to convince me, I needed a spiritual awakening. I needed to repent! I asked the Lord to forgive me, and I told him that I would accept whatever he told me. I remember thinking, “If God tells me the moon is green cheese, then the moon is green cheese! I’ll just have to change my thinking about the moon, about the color green, and about cheese!” Of course, God will never make a statement that so clearly contradicts our normal use of language, reason, and observation, but this idea expressed my new attitude of absolute submission to him.

That insight and its accompanying experience were similar to a second conversion. Not only did my heart belong to God, now my mind did, too. I can’t tell you how important this change was for me. I felt I had been pulled out of the quicksand in which I was sinking and set on a rock. As David said:

He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay;
And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. (Ps. 40:2)

WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

I tell my story partly to make apologetics more practical and partly to show that our apologetic task is not simply to give the right logical argument. Our doubts are caused as much by spiritual issues as they are by intellectual ones. If this is so, why bother with another book on apologetics? Precisely because I want to clarify the relationship between these two struggles—the intellectual and the spiritual. I am going to propose an apologetic that integrates important aspects of our evangelistic approach, instead of focusing solely on the intellectual dimension.

The first thing we should recognize with regard to apologetics is that we cannot convince anyone to become a Christian by intellectual argument alone. If we simply argued people into agreeing with us about the postulates of the Christian faith, they would not necessarily be saved. In order to be saved, you must put your personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This means trusting Jesus with your eternal life. Although it definitely must include intellectual assent to the truth, saving faith is much more than that; it is a *personal commitment*. After all, doesn't Satan "know," in a purely *intellectual* sense, the basic truths of the gospel (James 2:19)? But he is not saved because he lacks a *personal commitment* to Jesus Christ. In fact, he *hates* Jesus! Paul tells the Corinthians that he did not come to them with persuasive words of wisdom but that he preached Jesus Christ crucified. Why? So that their faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Man's most basic problem is spiritual, not intellectual. Nevertheless, this does not mean that intellectual reasoning has no place in apologetics. The non-Christian has built up defensive walls that include arguments and reasoning. Part of our job is to break down these barriers. As long as we keep our feet firmly planted in the Scriptures, we should be willing to dialogue about anything with the non-Christian in order to help him see the truth. Without compromising our position, we can try to under-

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stand his thinking, try to persuade him of his error, and try to show the beauty and consistency of the gospel. Paul used the Scriptures to “reason” with the Jews about the resurrection.

And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” (Acts 17:2–3. See also Acts 17:17.)

Peter exhorts us to be ready to give a “defense” or an “answer” (NIV) to everyone who asks us why we believe. The Greek word is *apologia*, from which we get our term *apologetics*.

But 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. (1 Peter 3:15)

Some people need a heavy dose of apologetic arguments to help bring them to Christ. For example, author Nancy Pearcey tells that her conversion came only after having “all her own ideas shot down.” She says, “The only step that remained was to acknowledge that I had been persuaded—and then to give my life to the Lord of Truth.”¹

We can define apologetics as the “defense of the faith,” as long as we realize that a good “defense” of the gospel also includes a good “offense.” That is, we also need to show the non-Christian the errors and inconsistencies in his or her thinking. Our goal is to take “captive” every thought for Christ. As Paul says:

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. (2 Cor. 10:5)

1. Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 55.

Becoming a Christian is primarily a matter of spiritual renewal—giving our hearts to Christ, but it also includes surrendering our minds to the Lord. It is the Holy Spirit who sovereignly brings about this change in both areas. The spiritual change involves intellectual change, and the intellectual change demands spiritual change. The two are inseparable.

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)

We should never separate apologetics from the gospel. In fact, apologetics is an essential aspect of evangelism.

We have a big task at hand. We need to understand non-Christian thinking; we need to discover scriptural principles about apologetics; we need to learn the best ways to present and defend the gospel; and we need to discern the unique shape of our message for each individual. That's apologetics.

THE PRESENT OPPORTUNITY

Although our postmodern age is challenging, it presents a unique opportunity. People are facing an uneasy life—often without hope in an absolute truth and often disoriented about right and wrong. Although people may seem reluctant to make a commitment, they have a sincere interest in spiritual things, and both ethical issues and personal relationships are very important to them.

The songs of a popular group called “System of a Down,” as well as the comments of their fans, may help us understand the current mind-set of many people.² Some of their lyrics are

2. The lyrics and comments made about System of a Down by their fans (which differ greatly in their interpretations) can be found at: http://www.songfacts.com/search_fact.php?artistsearch=System%20Of%20A%20Down.

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angry shouts of protest against social problems, such as war and genocide. They especially want to remind the world of the Armenian genocide that occurred between 1915 and 1923, since their grandparents had to witness the death of many of their own family members at the hand of the Turks.³

We detect a typical postmodern disillusion with technology and a growing interest in spiritual things in songs like “Science.”

Science fails to recognize the single most
Potent element of human existence
Letting the reins go to the unfolding
Is faith, faith, faith, faith.
Science, has failed, our world
Science has failed our Mother Earth.
Spirit-moves-through-all-things
Spirit-moves-through-all-things.

According to one observer, the title of the song “Chop Suey” describes the group’s musical style, because it has “lots of stuff thrown together.” It is hard to make sense of some lyrics. Try to decipher the message of one of their most popular songs, “Toxicity.”

Conversion, software version 7.0,
Looking at life through the eyes of a tire hub,
Eating seeds as a past time activity,
The toxicity of our city, of our city,
Now, what do you own the world?
How do you own disorder, disorder,
Now, somewhere between the sacred silence,
Sacred silence and sleep,
Somewhere, between the sacred silence and sleep,
Disorder, disorder, disorder. . . .

The individual phrases make sense. They seem to be focusing on some kind of corruption or pollution, but to me, the over-

3. System of a Down helped produce a video about this called “Screamers,” first broadcast in January 1, 2006. I saw it on the SCINE channel, September 24, 2007.

all structure appears fragmented. According to one fan, group member Daron Malakian stated that the song was about ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder).⁴ It is risky to try to interpret someone else's song, but I wonder if they are expressing their sense of disorder (either as seen in the cruel atrocities their family members witnessed, in the corruption of the drug world, in life in general, or as a person with ADD might perceive things) by making the very structure of the song itself disorderly.

According to some comments they appear to have made, System of a Down is quite tolerant about how people interpret their songs. Group member Serj Tankian is quoted as saying, "I've had people come up to me with the strangest interpretations of what lyrics might mean, and I'm like, 'You go! I never thought of that, but that works.' . . . I think true art is a universal reflection, and true artists are just messengers of that reflection—or, at best, skilled presenters."⁵

It is not always easy to communicate our message to this present generation, because many people may not give a high priority to coherency and absolute truth. However, deep down they must sense there is order and meaning to life. Furthermore, many really care about what happens to the world, and they have an unusual interest in spiritual things. We need to listen to them with respect, develop sincere friendships with them, help them struggle with social problems, and share our hope with them.

4. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxicity_%28song%29 (September 19, 2007).

5. See: http://thinkexist.com/quotes/serj_tankian/ (September 21, 2007). According to several fans, Malakian has commented that the song "Aerials" is about "nothing." Another fan claims that the same member confessed that none of the group had any idea what the song "Vicinity of Obscenity" meant, that they were just "having fun." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxicity_%28song%29 (September 19, 2007). Apparently, the name of the group was chosen because of how it sounds, rather than because of some special meaning. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/System_of_a_Down (September 19, 2007).

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One of the most terrifying paintings I have seen is called *Head VI* by Francis Bacon (1909–92), painted in 1949.⁶ I refer to it all the time because it graphically reflects postmodern despair.



It shows a man dressed in religious garb, sitting as if he were being exhibited in a glass box. His head is disappearing, and there is hardly anything above his nose, except for the eye cavities and black smears. The only part of his head you can see clearly is his

6. <http://www.francis-bacon.cx/figures/headvi.html> (May 19, 2005).

mouth, which is open in a chilling scream. I cannot pretend to know what the artist himself meant to communicate with this painting, but to me it represents the feelings of fear, being boxed in, and losing your mind.⁷ Bacon himself once wrote, “Man is aware that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, and that he must finish the game without reason.”⁸ Don’t you think people like Francis Bacon would be willing to listen to our encouraging message that we are not really just an accident?

HARD QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Here are some of the most common questions I hear people ask. When I teach classes on apologetics, I ask the students what hard questions people throw at them. They usually mention the same ones. Keep these questions in mind. We will come back to them, and later in the book I will suggest ways to answer them.

- How can you prove God exists?
- How can you be sure the Bible is true? What about the apparent contradictions and errors?
- What about other religions? How can you be sure they are not legitimate, too?
- What about the theory of evolution? Doesn’t it prove the Bible is wrong?
- How can a good God condemn people?
- If God is good and all-powerful, why does he allow evil?

7. Tate Gallery, London, wrote the following comments about this picture for an exhibition in 1962: “The earliest of Bacon’s paintings of Popes, this combines a number of themes which were to recur in many of his later works: the framework around the figure, like a glass box; the tassel; the paraphrase of Valasquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X; and the screaming mouth derived from the close-up of the nurse from [the film] *Battleship Potemkin*.” See <http://www.francis-bacon.cx/figures/headvi.html> (September 20, 2007).

8. H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 174.

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I believe the toughest issue the apologist faces is the question of evil. Here our battle can become bloody; we need to be prepared.

Recently, I watched a fascinating program on television (PBS) called “The Question of God.” Dr. Armond Nicoli, a Harvard professor, gathered a group of intellectuals with diverse beliefs to discuss the lives of C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud—one believed in God, one did not. The group was analyzing the way faith (or the lack of it) affected both men. One of the representatives did a great job of representing the Christian position, until he came to the question of suffering. At that point, he surrendered absolutely to the atheists, saying he had no answer and that the question troubled him deeply. Immediately, the representative from *Skeptic Magazine* jumped on the opportunity to ridicule him by saying he should become an atheist, because atheists don’t have to struggle with this problem.

The web site “Losing My Religion,”⁹ which is managed by people who say they used to be Christians, challenges Christians to debate difficult questions.¹⁰ The harsh attitudes and weak responses of some Christians there have disappointed me; I would like to see us do a better job of apologetics.

If you can tolerate offensive language, read these lines from a dialogue between Darcy West of “Losing My Religion” and a Christian named Roger.¹¹ Darcy, while dealing with the subject of hell, tries to make God sound like a hateful and perverted father or a tyrant like Hitler.

Darcy West: Roger, what would you think of a father who said to his child, “Love me by the time you are six, or I will bake

9. <http://www.losingmyreligion.com/> (May 19, 2005).

10. I believe a person who truly has been born again never will totally lose his or her faith, though he or she may fall away for a time.

11. Darcy West, “Heaven and Hell: Interview One,” <http://www.losingmyreligion.com/> (May 19, 2005).

you in the oven.”?

Roger: Darcy, God doesn't say that . . . he says, “Here's the way out of hell, PLEASE TAKE IT!”

Darcy West: Are you suggesting that hell exists outside of God's control?

Roger: What do you think?

Darcy West: If hell is not a danger that exists outside of God's control, then the analogy you used does not work. In your analogy, you portray God as trying to protect his child against a danger over which he has no control. Yet, in the case of the biblegod, hell is a danger which he created. It would be as if a parent said, “Don't go into the street or you will be hit by a car.” Then, when the child goes into the street, the parent jumps in a bus and runs the child over. If the parent then says, “Well, he made his choice,” would you believe that the parent did the right thing?

Roger: Darcy, hell was created for Satan and his demons, not for humans.

Darcy West: Roger, the abusive parent bought the oven to bake cookies. However, if he uses it to bake his children, does that remove his guilt?

This dialogue ends with Roger giving in to Darcy's argument, admitting that it would be better not to bow down to such a tyrant. Darcy felt victorious:

Darcy West: Who do you feel is more worthy of respect . . . a man who worships Hitler to avoid being sent to the ovens, or the man who refuses to bow to Hitler, regardless of the price.

Roger: Darcy, the man who refuses.

Darcy West: Roger, thank you very much.

Would you like to develop an apologetic understanding that would help you in situations like this? If so, I trust this book will not disappoint you.

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GROUP EXERCISE

Look at the painting *Head VI*, by Francis Bacon (back a few pages in this chapter) and discuss what you see. Mention details and talk about what they mean. Discuss how this painting helps us understand people today.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the illustration used to represent the non-Christian in the preface to this book?
2. In what ways should apologetics be “integrated”?
3. Which kind of revelation should have the priority in apologetics?
4. What was the author’s “second conversion”?
5. Why is a person not saved when he has only intellectually accepted the postulates of the Christian faith?
6. What is man’s greatest impediment to becoming a Christian?
7. Why does reasoning have a place in apologetics?
8. What is the origin of the term *apologetics*?
9. Write out 1 Peter 3:15.
10. How can we define *apologetics*?
11. What can we learn from the painting *Head VI*, by Francis Bacon?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you think it is important to study apologetics?
2. What were the most important factors leading to your own conversion?
3. Which of the six questions mentioned in this chapter do you frequently hear from non-Christians?
4. What is your opinion about the dialogue between Darcy

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- and Roger? What suggestions would you give Roger?
5. What do you think we can learn about contemporary people from the lyrics of the songs by System of a Down? What does this teach us about defending the gospel today? Do we face a greater challenge or a greater opportunity than previous generations?