

**§ 1. Foundations of Christian Doctrine**  
**Lecture 2**  
**What is Apologetics and Why Study It?**

Our Defenders class, which we have just embarked upon in series 3, is a survey of Christian doctrine and apologetics. Last Sunday we looked at why the study of doctrine is important. Today I want to say something about why the study of apologetics is also important for the mature Christian.

What is apologetics? We all know that apologetics is not learning how to tell someone you are sorry you are a Christian. Rather, apologetics is learning how to make the *other* guy sorry that you are a Christian! *[laughter]* No, that's not really right either! Apologetics is a branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for Christian truth claims.

That definition is important because what it implies is that apologetics is primarily a theoretical discipline. It certainly has a practical application. For example, in evangelism. But apologetics is not identical to evangelism. It is not art in sharing your faith. It is not training in, "If he says this, then you say that in return." It is not providing tactics for how to share your faith effectively with a non-believer. To repeat: apologetics is a branch of Christian theology that seeks to answer the question, "What is the rational justification for Christian truth claims?" While it will have a practical application in apologetics, Christian education, and your own personal devotional life, it is not identical with those practical applications but is a theoretical discipline that needs to be studied on its own.

I believe that apologetics plays a vital role in the realization of at least three ends that are vital to the survival of Christianity in Western culture.

1. *Shaping culture.* Apologetics serves to shape culture. Apologetics is vital, and in fact may well be necessary, if the Christian Gospel is to be heard as a legitimate option in Western society today. In general, Western society has become deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which was an 18<sup>th</sup> century movement in Europe that triumphed over European society. The hallmark of the Enlightenment was so-called free thought. That is to say, the pursuit of knowledge by means of human reason alone. It threw off the monarchy and threw off divine revelation and the church as well in the name of human reason. While it is by no means inevitable that such a pursuit is going to lead to non-Christian conclusions, and while most of the original Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau were in fact theists who believed in God, it has been the overwhelming impact of the Enlightenment upon Western culture that Western intellectuals do not consider theological knowledge to be possible. Theology for them is not a genuine source of knowledge. Therefore, theology is not a science; that is to say, in Latin a *scientia*, a source of knowledge. Reason and religion are said to be at odds with

one another. It is the deliverance of the physical sciences alone which are taken to be authoritative guides to our understanding of the world. The confident assumption of today's secular thinkers is that the picture of the world that will emerge from such a quest will be a thoroughly naturalistic picture.<sup>1</sup> They believe that the person who will follow the dictates of human reason alone unflinchingly to its logical conclusions will be atheistic or, at best, agnostic.

Why are these considerations of culture important? Why not just preach the Gospel in a dark and dying world? Why do we need to be concerned about the culture of Western society? Simply this: *the Gospel is never heard in isolation from a culture*. It is always heard against the background or the cultural milieu in which a person lives. A person who has been raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel that a person who has been raised in a thoroughly secularized culture will not. For the person who has been thoroughly secularized, you may as well ask him to believe in fairies or in leprechauns as in Jesus Christ. It will be that absurd to him.

To give a more realistic illustration of the influence of culture upon our thinking, just imagine how you would feel if you were approached in the airport or on the street by a devotee of the Hari Krishna movement who invites you to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation would likely strike you as bizarre, freakish, maybe even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Mumbai in India, such an invitation might be very serious cause for reflection. My fear is that evangelical Christians appear just as weird to the people on the streets of Bonn, Stockholm, and Paris as do the devotees of the Hari Krishna movement.

What awaits us here in North America should our slide into secularism continue is already evident in Europe. Jan and I spend about thirteen years living in four different European nations and so can testify personally to how hard the ground is. Although the majority of Europeans today maintain a kind of nominal affiliation with Christianity, only about 10% are practicing believers, and less than half of those are evangelical in their theology. The most significant trend in European religious affiliation is the growth of those who are classed as non-religious. This group went from effectively 0% of the population in 1900 to over 22% today in Europe. As a result of that, evangelism is immeasurably more difficult in Europe than in the United States. I spoke personally on European campuses in various countries across the continent and I can testify to how resistant the students are. It is difficult for the Gospel to even be heard seriously. For example, I recall very vividly that when I spoke at the University of Puerto in Portugal, the students were so skeptical that there could be someone with two European doctorates who was a Christian believer that they actually thought that I was an impostor. They

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<sup>1</sup> 5:08

thought I was a fraud. They telephoned the University of Leuven back in Belgium to verify that I was, in fact, a visiting researcher at the university. That is how deep the skepticism runs.

I think that the United States is following a little further back down this same road with Canada somewhere in between. Canada's slide into secularism has been precipitous. In 1900, evangelicals represented about 25% of the Canadian population. By 1989 the percentage of Canadian evangelicals had plummeted to less than 8%. My experience speaking on university campuses all across Canada suggests to me that Canada has a kind of mid-Atlantic culture, somewhere in between Great Britain and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Pluralism and relativism are the conventional wisdom at Canadian universities today. Political correctness and laws regulating speech stifle debate on issues of ethical importance like abortion or euthanasia. They can serve as weapons to oppress Christian institutions and ideas. I think that the example of Canada shows how vitally important it is to preserve a cultural milieu in which Christianity can be heard as an intellectually viable option.

Fortunately, during the last decade or so, Canadian evangelicals have slowly begun to reverse this trend. But the climb back will be much, much more difficult than the slide downward because it will be in the teeth of a culture that has come to oppose the Christian worldview.

I think it is for that reason that Christians who depreciate the value of apologetics because "no one comes to Christ through arguments" are so shortsighted. The value of apologetics extends far beyond your immediate one-on-one evangelistic contact. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics to help shape and preserve a cultural milieu in which the Gospel is an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women.

In 1913, in his article "Christianity and Culture," the great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen rightly declared,

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation . . . to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Machen's warning went unheeded, and biblical Christianity in the United States retreated into the closets of cultural isolationism. It has only been within the last few decades that now we have begun to re-emerge from those intellectual closets.

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<sup>2</sup> 9:59

<sup>3</sup> J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): p. 7.

I believe that today huge doors of opportunity stand wide open before us. We are living at a time in history when Christian philosophy is experiencing a veritable renaissance, revitalizing arguments for the existence of God in natural theology. We are living at a time in which contemporary science is more open to the existence of a Creator and Designer of the universe than at any time in recent memory. And we're living at a time at which biblical scholars have embarked upon a new quest of the historical Jesus which treats the Gospels seriously as valuable historical sources for the life and teachings of Jesus, and which has confirmed the broad outlines of the portrait of Jesus painted in the Gospels. So we are living, brothers and sisters, at an incredibly exciting point in history if we are interested in doing Christian apologetics. We are well-poised intellectually to help reshape our culture in such a way as to reclaim lost ground so that the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking people today.

I can imagine some people thinking in their minds, "Wait a minute, Bill. Don't we live in a postmodern culture in which these appeals to traditional apologetic arguments are no longer effective? Since postmodernists reject the traditional canons of logic and rationality and truth, rational arguments for Christianity no longer work. Rather, in today's postmodern culture we should simply share our narrative and invite people to participate in it."

In my opinion, this sort of thinking could not be more mistaken. In fact, I think that it is a disastrous misdiagnosis of American culture.<sup>4</sup> The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth propagated in our churches by misguided youth pastors. In fact, the idea of a postmodern culture is an impossibility. It would be utterly unlivable. Nobody is a postmodernist when it comes to reading the labels on a bottle of aspirin and a box of rat poison. If you've got a headache, you better believe that texts have objective meaning! It is not just all in your head. When you talk to people, you'll find that they are not relativistic about science, technology, and medicine. Rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic when it comes to religion and ethics – but that's not postmodernism, that's modernism! That is just old line verificationism and positivism which says that if you can't verify something through the five senses then it is just a matter of personal opinion and emotional expression. We live in a cultural milieu which remains at its heart deeply modernist.

In fact, I think that postmodernism is one of the most clever deceptions that Satan has yet invented. "Modernism is dead!" he tells us, "You don't need to fear it any longer. Forget about it. It is dead and buried." Meanwhile modernism, pretending to be dead, comes around in the fancy new masquerade of postmodernism. And we are told, "Your old apologetic arguments and evidences are no longer effective against this new challenger! Lay them aside. Simply share your narrative!" And so we are misled into voluntarily

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<sup>4</sup> 15:02

laying aside our best weapons of argument and evidence and logic and actually welcome modernism's triumph over us. If we adopt this suicidal course of action then the results for the church in the next generation are going to be catastrophic. Christianity will be reduced to just one voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each one sharing its narrative and none of them commending itself as the objective truth about reality while scientific naturalism continues to shape people's view of how reality *really* is.

Of course it should go without saying that in doing apologetics we should be relational, humble, and invitational. But that is hardly an insight original to postmodernism. From the very beginning, Christian apologists have known that we should present the reasons for our hope with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15. You don't need to abandon the canons of logic, rationality, and truth in order to exemplify these biblical virtues.

As for the idea that people in our culture are no longer interested in rational arguments and evidence for Christianity, nothing could be further from the truth. In my own experience of over thirty years of speaking on university campuses in the United States as well as in Europe and around the world, I always close my talks with a long period of question and answer from the audience. In all of those years, virtually no one has ever gotten up and said, "Your arguments are based upon Western standards of logic and rationality which are purely subjective and therefore we don't have to pay any attention to them." They just never express these kinds of postmodernist sentiments. I find that if you approach the question rationally then people will respond rationally. If you present scientific or historical evidence for Christian truth claims then the unbelieving students will dispute the premises of your argument or argue with you about the facts which is exactly where the discussion should be. But they don't attack the objectivity of science or history themselves. They don't call into question the validity of logical reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

I do find that students can be very skeptical of a Christian speaker and that they want therefore to hear both sides of the argument presented. For that reason, I've found debating to be an especially effective form for evangelism on university campuses. It gives students the chance to hear proponents of both views on a level playing field and then to make up their own minds. The approach in these debates is always one of sharing rational argument and evidence for the Christian worldview. Hundreds, even thousands, of students will come out to see these debates and hundreds of thousands of students will then watch them on YouTube for years afterwards. So don't be deceived into thinking that people are not interested in the rational arguments and evidence for Christianity. On the contrary there is tremendous interest I think among people in hearing a balanced discussion of the arguments for and against Christian belief. It is vitally important that we preserve a culture in this country in which Christianity can still be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking people. They may not come to Christ through the

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<sup>5</sup> 20:04

arguments, but what the arguments do is shape a cultural milieu in which it is reasonable to respond to the Gospel when their hearts are moved. The arguments and evidence, as it were, give them permission to follow their hearts when the Holy Spirit moves them with the Gospel.

So first and foremost will be shaping culture.

2. *Strengthening believers.* The second purpose served by apologetics is strengthening Christian believers. Apologetics is not only vital to shaping our culture, but it's also vital in the lives of individual Christian believers.

Back in 1982 as I was preparing for my doctoral exams in theology at the University of Munich, Jan and I spent a summer living in Berlin. I had been preparing for these examinations for over a year. I had a pile of notes about a foot high that I reviewed and memorized every day in anticipation of this examination. While we were in Berlin, we had the privilege of a visit by Ann Kiemel and her recently married husband, Will, as they were passing through Berlin. Ann Kiemel was at that time one of the most popular Christian women's speakers in America. She was a unique person. She would meet total strangers and she would sing to them little improvised songs to encourage them or point them to Christ. She would share her faith. She was extremely sentimental and emotional. She would tell stories, some of them fictional but some of them true, that would reduce a whole audience of women to tears in just minutes.

Well, as we were sitting around the table one day in Berlin, I thought I'd try to learn some lessons from her experience. So I said to her, "Ann, how do you prepare for your messages?"

She said, "Oh, I don't prepare."

I was just floored. I said, "You don't prepare?!"

And she said, "No."

I was just flabbergasted. I said, "Well, then, what do you do?"

And she said, "Oh, I just share my struggles."

I couldn't believe it. Here I was killing myself in years of preparation for ministry and she doesn't prepare! But there was no denying the effectiveness of her ministry. She led thousands of people to Christ. In fact, she would tell stories about how even hard-boiled academics would come to Christ through hearing her little improvised ditties and stories. I thought to myself, *Why am I doing what I am doing? Why am I killing myself doing all of this work? Is this just a huge waste of time? Why am I doing this when all I have to do is just share my struggles?*

Well, we returned to the United States that fall to do a sabbatical at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where a former classmate of mine lived. I shared with him one day about my conversation with Ann. I said to him that it had just really taken the wind out of my sails.<sup>6</sup> He said something to me that was very reassuring. He said, “Bill, someday those people that Ann Kiemel has led to the Lord are going to need what you have to offer.” And I think he was right. Emotions will carry you only so far, and then you are going to need something more substantive. Apologetics can help to provide some of that substance.

As I speak in churches around the country, I constantly meet Christian parents after the services who come up to me and say something like this: “Oh, if only you had been here two or three years ago! Our son (or our daughter) had questions which no one in the church could answer. And now he (or she) is far from the Lord.” It just breaks my heart to meet parents like this because it is so unnecessary. There are good arguments and evidences for the truth of the Christian faith if people would only familiarize themselves with it. Unfortunately, parents are often untrained in the defense of the faith and so their children are raised in ignorance of this as well. In high school and college, Christian teenagers are assaulted intellectually with every manner of non-Christian philosophy conjoined with an overwhelming relativism. If parents are not intellectually engaged with their faith and they don’t have sound arguments for Christian theism and good answers to their children’s questions, then I think we are in real danger of losing our youth. It is no longer enough to simply teach your children Bible stories. They need to have doctrine and apologetics. I think that if anyone is going to embark upon having children and raising children in Western culture, he needs to have at least some training in Christian apologetics.

Unfortunately, I think that the church as a whole has largely dropped the ball in this area. In youth ministries we often focus upon entertainment, felt needs, and we do not train our kids for the intellectual challenges that they are going to confront. I think that we, for the sake of our youth, have got to school ourselves and train ourselves in the defense of the faith.

But Christian apologetics does a lot more for the individual believer than just preserve him against falling away. The positive up-building effects of apologetics are even more evident. Again, I see this all the time on campuses where I debate. John Stackhouse is a Canadian theologian and he once remarked to me that these debates are really Westernized versions of what missionaries call “a power encounter” where the God of Christianity proclaimed by the missionary has a kind of power encounter in which he triumphs over the local gods of the ethnic people to whom they are bringing the Gospel. I thought that was a very perceptive analysis. As Christianity is defended in these

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<sup>6</sup> 25:01

encounters, Christian students come away from these debates with a renewed confidence in the truth of the Christian faith. Their heads are held high; they are proud to be Christians. They are anxious to share their faith. I remember one Canadian student after a debate saying to me, “I can’t wait to share my faith in Christ!” I think that many Christians are afraid to share their faith because they are afraid that the non-believer will ask them a question or raise an objection that they can’t answer. But if you have good answers to the unbeliever’s objections and know how to respond to his questions then you won’t be afraid. I think that training in apologetics is one of the keys to fearless evangelism.

So in this and many other ways, apologetics can help to build up the body of Christ by strengthening individual believers.

3. *Evangelizing unbelievers.* I think that apologetics is useful not only in strengthening Christian believers, but also in evangelizing unbelievers. Many people will say to you, “Nobody comes to Christ through arguments!” I don’t know how many times I’ve heard this.<sup>7</sup> My colleague, J. P. Moreland, has now taken to answering these people by saying that is not true. I’ve done it myself. And I can say personally if you will go to the testimonial section of the Reasonable Faith website<sup>8</sup> you will be able to read first-hand testimony sent in to us from people who have come to Christ through seeing a video or reading a book. These are heartwarming, wonderful stories of people who had either drifted away from the Christian faith and been away from it for years, or people who have never been Christians and have come to Christ because they heard arguments and evidence for the Christian faith.

Lee Strobel recently remarked to me that he has lost count of the number of people who have come to Christ through his books *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*. That has been our experience in ministry as well. There is a group of people who will respond to arguments and evidence when they are presented prayerfully, conjoined with a personal testimony, and used by the Holy Spirit.

That doesn’t mean that apologetics are necessary for evangelism or will be effective with everybody. But there is, I think, a minority of people with whom this sort of approach will be valuable. Just as a missionary might feel called to reach some obscure people group that would not be very large, so I think we should also be burdened to reach out to that minority of people who will respond to apologetic arguments and evidence. Paul said of his ministry, “I have become all things to all men that I might by all means win some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

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<sup>7</sup> 29:58

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/testimonials> (accessed October 29, 2014).

But moreover, and here the case of the persons who will respond to apologetics I think differ significantly from the obscure people group, the people who respond to apologetic arguments and evidence are often incredibly influential in our culture. I find that the people who resonate most with our ministry are engineers, lawyers, and people in medicine. Many of you would fit that description. These are some of the most influential people in American society. One of these types of persons, for example, was C. S. Lewis. Think of the incredible impact that the conversion of that one man has had in the decades since his death. So reaching this minority of people, I think, will have tremendous benefits for the Kingdom of God.

So I think that training in apologetics is a vital part of Christian discipleship. It plays a vital and perhaps even necessary role in shaping culture, also in strengthening believers, and finally in evangelizing non-believers. So for all of these reasons I am unapologetically enthusiastic about Christian apologetics!

That brings us to the end of our lesson today. Next time we will embark upon our study of the first area of Christian doctrine which is the doctrine of revelation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Total Running Time: 33:50 (Copyright © 2014 William Lane Craig)