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# Lecture 1:

## What is Christian Doctrine and Why Study It?

Today is a landmark day because we begin a new Defenders curriculum. For the next four years or so we are going to be studying together the entire range of Christian doctrine, from doctrine of revelation to doctrine of the last things. Today we begin anew. I want to welcome all of you who are joining us via live stream, both individual persons as well as Sunday School classes which will now be part of our wider Defenders family.

The purpose of our Defenders class is threefold. I want to remind us of what these purposes are as we begin anew.

1. The first and primary purpose of this class is *to train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths*. Each of those verbs is important. This is not just lawyer-speak where you pile up a number of verbs in a sentence.

First of all, we want to train Christians to understand Christian truths – to understand what we as Christians believe.

Secondly, we want to help you to articulate what you believe so that you can explain it to others when they ask you exactly what it is that you as a Christian believe.

Thirdly, we want to help you to defend what you believe when you are asked for a reason as to why you believe as you do.

Our class verse is 1 Peter 3:15 which says, “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and reverence.”

So the first and primary purpose of our Defenders class is to train you to understand, articulate, and to defend what you as a Christian believe.

2. *We also want to reach out with the Gospel to those who have not yet come to know Christ, always being ready to give a defense to anyone who would ask a reason for our hope*. We are an open class, an inclusive class, and we welcome not only Christians of various denominations but also non-believers as well. Atheists, agnostics, and anyone who is seeking to find the truth about God and Christianity is welcome here and welcomed to express his doubts, his skepticism, and to raise his questions. We want to reach out with the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ.

3. *We want to be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and care*. In a large megachurch like Johnson Ferry Baptist, it is very easy to get lost in the crowd. Therefore it is important to have a sort of church within the church – a smaller group where, as they say, everybody knows your name. We can pray for one another, we learn to know each other, we can help one another when facing difficult times. As I say, I conceive of this as a sort of incendiary fellowship; that is to say, it is like the logs in a fireplace. You take those burning logs and separate them – put them apart – and they will soon go out. But as they are collected together, they mutually reinforce one another and you have a bright and warm burning fire. That is the way we want to be as we gather together to mutually encourage and stimulate each other in our discipleship for the Lord.

Our first section is an introduction to Christian doctrine. As I say, the Defenders class is going to be a survey of Christian doctrine. We will be hitting the main themes – the main topics – of Christian doctrine during this class. So we will talk, for example, at the beginning about the doctrine of revelation – how does God reveal himself to us. The reference there is not to the biblical book of Revelation, but rather to God’s revelation of himself, whether in nature or in Jesus Christ or in the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> How do we learn truth about God? Then we will talk about the doctrine of God – what God is like and why we should believe that God exists. Then we will go on to talk about the doctrine of creation – how God relates to the world that he has made. We will focus then on the doctrine of Christ – the person of Christ as well as the work of Christ. We will talk about the doctrine of man – man as created in the image of God as well as man fallen and in need of God’s salvation and forgiveness. We will talk about the doctrine of justification, including doctrine of sin and doctrine of salvation. We will talk about the doctrine of the church. What is the church that God is establishing here on Earth? Finally, the doctrine of the last things which will be the end of human history and the eternal state.

These will be the broad topics that we will survey in this course. We will go as fast as discussion allows. We’ve got no agenda in the sense of a time table to get through. So there will be ample time for questions and discussion. Each class will just build on the previous week. We will cumulatively and slowly cover these topics.

My inspiration for the way I work is what Jan and I call the turtle method, after the famous story of the tortoise and the hare. You will remember the hare started off in a flash but then soon grew tired and rested, whereas the turtle’s steady, relentless, slow plodding eventually wins the race. It is the turtle method that we follow in this class. We will just go as fast as your questions and discussion allow.

We begin then by asking the question: what is Christian doctrine anyway? I am sure that for many of you, you don’t have a clue what we are even talking about. When I first went to Wheaton College I had to take an introduction to Christian doctrine, and I literally did not know what the class was about. I had been a Christian for two years, but in our church we never talked about doctrine so I had no idea what even was under discussion in this course.

I think Christian doctrine can be very well defined as suggested by the famous church historian Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *The Christian Tradition*, which is a history of Christian doctrine. Professor Pelikan defines Christian doctrine as what the church believes and teaches. Christian doctrine is simply what the Christian church believes and teaches. You might have some reservations about that definition. You might say, “Isn’t Christian doctrine what the Bible teaches and what we are to believe?” I think that Christian doctrine often involves human reflection upon the data of Scripture so that doctrine really isn’t complete until we have reflected upon the raw material of Scripture and attempt to systematically analyze it and put it into doctrinal form.

So, for example, doctrines like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ are not explicitly taught in Scripture but rather they are the result of the church’s reflection upon the raw material of Scripture and an attempt to systematize it into a coherent statement of what

we, as Christians, believe. I think that the necessity in many cases of having rational reflection upon the data of the Bible indicates that doctrine is more than simply what the Bible says; it is what the church believes and teaches as it reflects upon the data that is in Scripture.

Also, I think Pelikan's definition is better because the church is a very broad institution that often has different interpretations of what the Bible teaches. As we will see in this class, very often Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants of all sorts will differ doctrinally on the way they read the Bible.<sup>2</sup> There is, therefore, both true doctrine as well as false doctrine. That wouldn't make sense if you just say doctrine is what the Bible teaches. Doctrine is a reflection and systematization of what the Bible teaches, and therefore can be different for different denominations and persons. I think some doctrines can be false and other doctrines will be true.

So I would say that Pelikan's definition is a good one. When we study Christian doctrine, we are studying what the church believes and teaches in all of its diversity. Then we will attempt to discern what is true doctrine – what is the truth about God or the issue that we are discussing.

We may ask as our next question: why study doctrine after all? Why not just be content to enjoy the Christian life and go through life attending church, going to prayer meetings, doing evangelism, and all the other practical aspects of the Christian faith? Why should we study doctrine? I can think of at least four reasons why I think it is important to study doctrine.

1. *Every Christian is a theologian.* It is not just professors of theology or those who have academically studied in seminary who do theology. Every Christian is a theologian. In virtue of the fact that you are a Christian you are committed to certain beliefs about reality – a certain worldview that God exists, that God is three persons, that Christ is both human and divine, that God has created the world, that we are morally fallen before God and in need of his forgiveness and cleansing. All of these are Christian doctrines, or the stuff or subject of Christian doctrines. Therefore, the question isn't whether or not you are going to be a theologian; the question is whether you are going to be a poor theologian or a good theologian. Just by being a Christian, you are committed to being a theologian.

Look at what Paul has to say about this in Ephesians 4:13-15. Here Paul talks about the gifts that God has given to the church. He says,

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Here Paul indicates that part of spiritual Christian maturity is doctrinal discernment so that you won't be buffeted about by every new wind of doctrine that comes along. You will have a grasp of what is true and what is false and therefore able to be doctrinally discerning.

Or look at Paul's letter to the Galatians, Galatians 1:6-9. Here Paul is so angry with these false apostles who have come to the churches in Galatia and are teaching false doctrine. He says,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Here Paul is literally saying these purveyors of false doctrine to the Galatian churches should go to hell!<sup>3</sup> He says let them go to hell, these purveyors of false doctrines. That is how strongly he feels about the importance of having the right teaching about Christ and about the Gospel of grace that he preached.

Finally, look over at his letter to Titus, Titus 1:9. The context here is Paul's list of the qualifications to be an elder in the church. Of the various qualifications that he lists to be an elder he says in verse 9, "He must hold firm to the sure Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." I don't know about you, but even if you are not an elder in the church (if you never have the opportunity to be an elder) surely all of us would want to have this sort of Christian maturity and character qualities that qualify you to be an elder. I've never been an elder in a church, but I want to meet as best I can this list of qualifications that goes toward being a mature Christian. Part of those qualifications are to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and then also to refute those who contradict it.

To repeat: every Christian is a theologian, and it belongs to Christian maturity to have a correct understanding of right doctrine and to be doctrinally discerning when people come to you bringing false doctrine.

2. *Right living presupposes right thinking about God.* Notice the pattern in Paul's epistles. In his letters, typically the first half or so of the letter will be devoted to doctrinal teaching. Then in the second half of the letter he will switch to practical application and your life application of the teachings that he's given. Look, for example, at his letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 1-3 he gives instruction in Christian doctrine. Then beginning with Ephesians 4:1 you see the transition: "I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." The "therefore" indicates the transition between these doctrinal truths – if these are true, therefore now live a life that is worthy of this calling that you have.

Look over in Philippians, too, for the same pattern. In Philippians 1-3 we have his doctrinal teaching. Then beginning in chapter 4 he says, "Therefore, my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved." He then begins to give practical application.

So if we want to live correctly for Christ as his disciples we need to first think correctly about Christ. If your thinking is skewed and off-base, it is going to affect your life and your Christian discipleship.

3. *The study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all of our minds.* Matthew 22:37-38. Jesus, when asked what is the greatest commandment, said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” So we are to love God with our whole being – all aspects of our personality.<sup>4</sup> That includes loving God with your mind. I would say that one of the best ways that you can fulfill this command to love God with your mind is to study his truth. Reflect on his truth. Know his truth accurately. Explore his truth. This is a way of expressing your love to the Lord because you love his truth and want to study it.

4. *Christ cannot be separated from truths about Christ.* Look at 2 John 9-10. Here John is warning about people claiming to be Christians – claiming to follow Jesus – but who are teaching false doctrine. In verse 9 he says,

Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.

[That is really interesting. Notice that he doesn’t say anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in Christ. He doesn’t say that. He says someone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.]

He who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting.

What John is telling us there is that it is not enough to say, “I love Jesus, and I follow Jesus, and I have warm, fuzzy feelings about Jesus.” If you are not abiding in the doctrine of Christ, he says you do not have Christ. You can’t separate Christ from the truths about Christ. These go together hand-in-glove. So we need a combination of both doctrinal wisdom along with a spirit-filled enthusiasm for Christ. Doctrine without the Holy Spirit leads to legalism. The dead letter. But the Holy Spirit without doctrine leads to fanaticism. You have no controls on that subjective experience. You need the combination of good doctrine with a spirit-filled Christian experience. Therefore, you can’t separate Christ and the truths about Christ. A vibrant living relationship with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit should be one that involves appreciating Christian doctrine.

For all of these reasons, I think that the study of Christian doctrine is an integral part of Christian discipleship and of becoming a mature Christian. Every Christian is a theologian, right living presupposes right thinking about God, the study of doctrine is a way in which we express our love for God with our minds, and Christ can’t be separated from truths about Christ.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* As you are going through the doctrine piece, my question was do you see the differences in doctrine as the genesis of denominational thoughts so that the disagreements about doctrine really have generated a lot of denominations? And what are your thoughts on your point 4 – you can't separate Christ from the truth about Christ? About the recent Presbyterian splits and things of that nature.

*Dr. Craig:* I do think that denominational differences do tend to be rooted primarily in doctrine. They differ on what they think Christian teaching is. There are some denominations that are very close (they are almost doctrinally indistinguishable), but maybe there will be different styles of worship, or maybe even racial or ethnic differences that might cause different denominations. But I think for the most part the major fault lines in the Christian church today would be drawn along doctrinal lines.

The second part of the question was . . .

*Student:* Number 4. When you talked about Christ cannot be separated from the truths about Christ. You see some of these denominational splits like the Presbyterian church where one part of the denomination seems to go way off of point 4.<sup>5</sup>

*Dr. Craig:* There is a huge demographic shift going on in the United States since really about the 1950s. The old mainline denominations – your United Methodists, your Congregationalists, your Presbyterians, your Episcopalians – used to be the cultural heavyweights in American society. Those denominations have in many cases drifted from fidelity to biblical orthodoxy, and they are now in free fall. Their seminaries are closing, their attendance is waning, whereas denominations that were not in this mainline group but have remained biblically orthodox tend to be the ones that are still growing or holding their own. I think there is a huge demographic shift going on in this country in that respect.

I do want to just say one more thing lest I be misunderstood. I don't mean to suggest that every doctrine is a cardinal doctrine. That is to say, if you disagree doctrinally therefore you are a heretic. There are fine points of doctrine that can almost be like hair-splitting and that don't really matter. There are really very few doctrines that we would say are cardinal doctrines. That is to say, doctrines that are essential to salvation. Certainly the existence of God would be such a doctrine, wouldn't it? You couldn't by any conceivable imagination be a Christian if you don't think God exists. Or that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and died for your sins. Those would seem to be cardinal doctrines. But in many other cases, the doctrinal differences between Christians will be slight. I think there are still truth about these – there is a truth and falsity about these. It is not as though just anything goes. But nevertheless not a great deal of consequence will hang on some of these doctrines.

### **END DISCUSSION**

With that we are out of time. Next week I want to share something about why we should study apologetics as well as doctrine, because in the course of this curriculum we will occasionally take excursions, or side trips, where we will explore why one ought to believe that these doctrines are true. That will take us into Christian apologetics. Next week I

want to say a few words about why the study of apologetics as well as doctrine is also important for Christian maturity.<sup>6</sup>



## 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>7</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 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>8</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>9</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.

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.”

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9 J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): p. 7.

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>10</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 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>11</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 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>12</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 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>13</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>14</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).

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

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13 29:58

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

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>15</sup>