

Apologetics Training - Advice to Christian Apologists Part 1

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

Have you ever wondered what type of training would be the most beneficial for those who aspire to become Christian apologists? Dr. Craig, when asked to present for the Stobb Lectures, recently addressed students interested in apologetics as ministry, offering them three key pieces of advice to help in that pursuit. Here, in the first of two parts, he explains why budding apologists should select an area of specialization in their studies and then demonstrates why a background in analytic philosophy provides a crucial foundation, even as a part of historical and scientific apologetics training.

APOLOGETICS TRAINING - ADVICE TO CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS PART 1

In 1983, when Alvin Plantinga delivered his inaugural lecture as the John O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, he chose as his topic "Advice to Christian Philosophers." Today I've chosen as my subject the related, but somewhat broader, topic "Advice to Christian Apologists." Plantinga's advice was, however, directed toward those who already were Christian philosophers, whereas my remarks might be more appropriately entitled "Advice to Budding Christian Apologists," that is to say, to those who will but have not yet entered into a ministry of Christian apologetics and wish to know what goes into effective apologetics training.

We saw yesterday the tremendous need for and benefits of Christian apologetics, both in shaping culture and in influencing individual lives. Now to help us to do this well, let me make a few suggestions.

1. Apologetics training - Select some area in which to specialize.

1. Select some area in which to specialize. Some popular Christian apologists make the mistake of trying to be a jack of all trades, and so they are master of none. As a result, their knowledge of the field may be very broad, but it is not very profound. While they may be able to present an initial argument for Christian truth claims, they soon wilt under the pressure of critique, especially on the part of specialists. Speaking on a university campus, they may find themselves ridden with anxiety lest a non-Christian faculty member should show up in their audience and raise an objection they are at a loss to deal with. If that does happen, they may not only embarrass themselves but also injure the credibility of the Christian faith. A merely generalized knowledge of Christian apologetics is fine for certain contexts, and certainly better than nothing, but it will limit the horizons of your ministry.

Instead, I encourage you to specialize in a certain area of apologetics, even as you continue to be well-informed in other areas. For example, given the renaissance in Christian philosophy that has been going on over the last 40 years in the Anglo-American world, many of our best Christian

apologists today are, not surprisingly, philosophers.

Christian philosophy, involved as it is with issues of epistemology-like justification, rationality, and warrant, - issues of metaphysics - such as the nature of ultimate reality, truth, and the soul - , and of ethics - such as the existence of moral values and duties, theories of the foundations of value, and the meaning of moral claims - , naturally lends itself to Christian apologetics training. Indeed, the Christian philosopher can hardly avoid apologetics, since the questions he studies are pertinent to a Christian world and life view. Even if his conclusions should turn out to be largely sceptical - say, that we cannot know the nature of ultimate reality - , that conclusion would be vitally important to Christian apologetics, since such a conclusion would scuttle the project of natural theology. So the field of philosophy has a natural affinity to apologetics.

a. Apologetics training - Why a background in philosophy is invaluable to the apologist

Indeed, I should say that the relevance of philosophy to apologetics is so great that even if you do not specialize in philosophical apologetics but choose to go into some other type of apologetics, you would do well to take a strong dose of analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy is the kind of philosophy that predominates in the Anglophone world. This style of philosophizing contrasts sharply with that of Continental philosophy. Whereas Continental philosophy tends to be obscure, imprecise, and emotive, analytic philosophy lays great worth and emphasis on clarity of definitions, careful delineation of premisses, and logical rigor of argumentation. Unfortunately, theology has for a long time learned to follow the lead of Continental philosophy, which tends to result in darkness being piled upon darkness. The renaissance of Anglo-American Philosophy of Religion over the last 40 years has shown that important apologetical issues can be brilliantly illuminated through the light of philosophical analysis. Richard Swinburne, Professor Emeritus of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford University has written,

It is one of the intellectual tragedies of our age that when philosophy in English-speaking countries has developed high standards of argument and clear thinking, the style of theological writing has been largely influenced by the continental philosophy of Existentialism, which, despite its considerable other merits, has been distinguished by a very loose and sloppy style of argument. If argument has a place in theology, large-scale theology needs clear and rigorous argument. That point was very well grasped by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, by Berkeley, Butler, and Paley. It is high time for theology to return to their standards. [1]

By employing the high standards of reasoning characteristic of analytic philosophy we can powerfully formulate apologetic arguments for both commending and defending the Christian worldview. In recent decades, analytic philosophers of religion have shed new light on the rationality and warrant of religious belief, on arguments for the existence of God, on divine attributes such as necessity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness, on the problem of suffering and evil, on the nature of the soul and immortality, on the problem of miracles, and even on peculiarly Christian doctrines like the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, original sin, revelation,

hell, and prayer. The wealth of material which is available to the Christian apologist through the labor of analytic philosophers of religion is breath-taking.

If you want to do apologetics effectively, you need to be trained in analytic philosophy. And I say this even if your area of specialization is not philosophical apologetics. Whatever your area of specialization, you will be better equipped as an apologist if you have had training in analytic philosophy. Suppose you choose to specialize in scientific or historical apologetics. The fact is that some of the most important issues you will confront will be questions arising from philosophy of science or epistemology. Over and over again I see scientists and New Testament scholars making faulty inferences or proceeding from unexamined presuppositions because of their philosophical naiveté.

b. Apologetics training - The presupposition of naturalism is a barrier for historical apologetics

Take the field of historical apologetics, for example, specifically historical study of the life of Jesus. It is remarkable how obtrusive philosophical issues are in this field. The New Testament scholar R. T. France has observed,

At the level of their literary and historical character we have good reason to treat the Gospels seriously as a source of information on the life and teaching of Jesus.... Indeed many ancient historians would count themselves fortunate to have four such responsible accounts [as the Gospels], written within a generation or two of the events, and preserved in such a wealth of early manuscript evidence. Beyond that point, the decision to accept the record they offer is likely to be influenced more by openness to a supernaturalist world view than by strictly historical considerations. [2]

The accuracy of France's analysis is borne out by the self-confession of the radical Jesus Seminar of the presuppositions that guide its work. The presupposition which the Seminar acknowledges as of first importance is anti-supernaturalism or more simply, naturalism . In this context naturalism is the view that every event in the world has a natural cause. In other words, miracles cannot happen.

Now this presupposition constitutes an absolute watershed for the study of the gospels. If you presuppose naturalism, then things like the incarnation, the Virgin Birth, Jesus' miracles, and his resurrection go out the window before you even sit down at the table to look at the evidence. As supernatural events, they cannot be historical. But if you are at least open to supernaturalism, then these events can't be ruled out in advance. You have to be open to looking honestly at the evidence that they occurred.

The Jesus Seminar is remarkably candid about its presupposition of naturalism. In the Introduction to their edition of *The Five Gospels* they state:

The contemporary religious controversy turns on whether the world view reflected in the Bible can be carried forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith . . . the Christ of creed and dogma . . . can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. [3]

But why, we might ask, is it impossible in a scientific age to believe in a supernatural Christ? After all, a good many scientists are Christian believers, and contemporary physics shows itself quite open to the possibility of realities which lie outside the domain of physics. What justification is there for anti-supernaturalism?

Here things really get interesting. According to the Jesus Seminar, the historical Jesus by definition must be a non-supernatural figure. Here they appeal to D. F. Strauss, the 19th century German Biblical critic. Strauss's book *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* was based squarely in a philosophy of naturalism. According to Strauss, God does not act directly in the world; He acts only indirectly through natural causes. With regard to the resurrection, Strauss states that God's raising Jesus from the dead "is irreconcilable with enlightened ideas of the relation of God to the world." [4]

Now listen carefully at what the Jesus Seminar says about Strauss:

Strauss distinguished what he called the 'mythical' (defined by him as anything legendary or supernatural) in the Gospels from the historical . . . The choice Strauss posed in his assessment of the Gospels was between the supernatural Jesus--the Christ of faith--and the historical Jesus. [5]

Notice: Anything that is supernatural is by definition not historical. There's no argument given; it's just defined that way. Thus we have a radical divorce between the Christ of faith, or the supernatural Jesus, and the real, historical Jesus. Now the Jesus Seminar gives a ringing endorsement of Strauss's distinction: they say that the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is "the first pillar of scholarly wisdom." [6]

But now the whole quest of the historical Jesus becomes a charade. If you begin by presupposing naturalism, then of course what you wind up with is a purely natural Jesus! This reconstructed, naturalistic Jesus is not based on historical evidence, but on definition. What is amazing is that the Jesus Seminar makes no attempt to defend this naturalism; it is just presupposed.

But this presupposition is wholly unjustified. As long as the existence of God is even possible, then we have to be open to the possibility that He has acted miraculously in the universe. Only if you have a proof for atheism can you be justified in thinking miracles are impossible. One can see how the debate over historical claims pivots on philosophical presuppositions and why apologetics training must therefore include instruction in analytic philosophy.

Now sometimes sceptical critics will adopt a somewhat softer line, presupposing a methodological naturalism as a pre-condition of historical study of the life of Jesus. For example, Gerd Lüdemann rejects Jesus' resurrection as the best explanation of the historical evidence because the resurrection is a miracle, and Professor Lüdemann has a methodological presupposition against miracles. He states, "Historical criticism . . . does not reckon with an intervention of God in history." [7] Thus, the resurrection cannot count as an historical explanation. So what justification does Lüdemann give for this crucial presupposition of the inadmissibility of miracles? All he offers is a couple of one-sentence allusions to Hume and Kant. He says, "Hume . . . demonstrated that a miracle is defined in such a way that 'no testimony is sufficient to establish it'." [8] The miraculous conception of the resurrection, he says, presupposes "a philosophical realism that has been untenable since Kant."

Now Professor Lüdemann is not a philosopher; he's a New Testament theologian. And his procedure here of merely dropping names of famous philosophers is sadly all too typical of theologians. Thomas Morris, a Christian philosopher, comments in his book *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* ,

What is particularly interesting about the references theologians make to Kant or Hume is that most often we find the philosopher merely mentioned . . . , but we rarely, if ever, see an account of precisely which arguments of his are supposed to have accomplished the alleged demolition In fact, I must confess to never having seen in the writings of any contemporary theologian the exposition of a single argument from either Hume or Kant, or any other historical figure for that matter, which comes anywhere near to demolishing . . . historical Christian doctrine, or . . . theological realism [9]

Hume's argument against miracles was already refuted in the 18th century by Paley, Less, and Campbell, and most contemporary philosophers also reject it as fallacious, including such prominent philosophers of science as Richard Swinburne and John Earman and analytic philosophers such as George Mavrodes and William Alston. Even the atheist philosopher Antony Flew, himself a Hume scholar, admits that Hume's argument is defective as it stands. [10] And as for philosophical realism, this is the dominant view among philosophers today, at least in the analytic tradition. So if Lüdemann, as he avers, rejects the admissibility of miracles on the basis of Hume and Kant, then he's got a lot of explaining to do. Otherwise, his rejection of the resurrection hypothesis is based on a groundless presupposition. Reject that presupposition, and it's pretty hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts.

You mustn't bluff, though. Unless you have a working understanding of the arguments Hume and Kant put forth, it will do no good to drop Paley or Swinburne's names as a response. You would be committing the same error that Morris is warning against. Therefore, to be effective in apologetics, training in philosophy will provide you with a strong foundation for why arguments such as Lüdemann's fail.

c. Apologetics training - Equivocating between metaphor and nonsense

Sceptical critics usually do not have the courage, as Lüdemann does, to simply deny the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Instead they seek to salvage some vestige of Christian faith by distinguishing between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Even if the former should turn out to have been a purely human figure who met his final demise in first century Judea, the latter may still be regarded as risen triumphantly from the dead. For example, Marcus Borg, one of the most celebrated of the Jesus Seminar fellows, makes a sharp bifurcation between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. The pre-Easter Jesus, he says, was merely a human being who is now "dead and gone." [11] The post-Easter Jesus, he says, is "what Jesus became after his death." [12] The post-Easter Jesus lives on in the experience and tradition of the Church.

But this sort of theological salvage operation entangles itself in a web of philosophical difficulties. What Jesus literally became after his death, on Borg's view, was a rotting mass of flesh. What Borg means by the post-Easter Jesus is what Jesus became in the thinking and imagination of the Christian Church. It's crucial to understand that on Borg's view there really isn't anybody out there called the post-Easter Jesus who objectively exists, independently of our experience and imagination.

The best analogy for this I can think of is the relation between Santa Claus and the original fourth century bishop St. Nicholas. Nicholas was the real person who lived and died. Santa Claus is an imaginary figure, who, though very real in the experience of small children, does not actually exist. Now while rational adults might believe in some of the things this imaginary figure symbolizes, like the spirit of giving, we wouldn't believe in him .

In the same way, if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, we might believe in what the post-Easter Jesus symbolizes, say, love for others, but we wouldn't believe in him . We wouldn't worship him or pray to him or think he loves us, because that would be letting ourselves be deluded by our own imaginations.

Now despite his very misleading Christian language, I think that on Borg's view the post-Easter Jesus is really just a symbolic figure. When Borg affirms, "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus lives" or "God has vindicated Jesus," he doesn't regard these statements as literally true. Rather these statements are metaphorical , and Borg says, "I affirm these metaphors to be true." [13]

But now we come to real difficulties. What is required for a metaphor to be true? If I come in out of the rain and say, "It's raining cats and dogs out there!," what does it mean to say that this metaphor is true? Well, it means that there is a literal truth which this metaphor figuratively expresses, namely, that it's raining hard outside. Without such a literal truth, a metaphor is just a meaningless combination of words. If I come in and say, "It's raining zebras and armadillos outside!," then unless I can give some literal truth which these words express, then they're not a metaphor at all, but just nonsense. Thus, metaphorical truth presupposes literal truth. If there is no

literal truth, then there is no metaphorical truth either.

So the crucial question is, what literal truth is expressed by statements about the post-Easter Jesus like "Jesus is risen," or "Jesus loves me"? Here Borg faces an insuperable problem. For he says that there are no literal truths about God. He thinks that God is ineffable, meaning "beyond all rational thought." He writes, "God is ineffable God is beyond all images, physical and mental All our thinking about God . . . are attempts to express the ineffable. The ineffable is beyond all our concepts, even this one." [14] But that entails that there is no literal truth expressed by his affirmations about the post-Easter Jesus. Therefore, they're not metaphors; they're nonsense.

But it gets even worse. For it's incoherent to say that God is "beyond all our concepts." For if none of our concepts applies to God, then even the concept of ineffability does not apply to God. But then God is not ineffable after all! Thus Borg's view is self-refuting: if it's true, then it's false. Borg seems to realize this, when he says God is "beyond all our concepts, even this one ." But if the concept of ineffability does not apply to God, then it's not the case that God is ineffable, as Borg affirms. Thus, Borg's view is self-referentially incoherent and cannot be rationally affirmed.

Thus, philosophical issues can sometimes be absolutely decisive in dealing with historical issues important to the Christian apologist. Apologetics training is simply incomplete without a proper grounding in philosophy.

d. Apologetics training – How Philosophy is vital in the dialogue between science and theology

Similarly, in the flourishing contemporary dialogue between science and theology, which is vitally relevant to the field of scientific apologetics, I find again and again that the central issues turn out to be philosophical rather than scientific. It would be easy to illustrate this with respect to relativity theory and quantum theory, the twin pillars of contemporary physics, which overtly involve epistemological and metaphysical issues. But even in a comparatively theoretically low-level science like biology philosophical issues obtrude.

It has been the enduring contribution of Philip Johnson to the debate over biological origins to draw attention to the crucial role played by methodological assumptions in theory assessment. As I understand him, Johnson's main point can best be expressed in terms of the model of scientific explanation known as inference to the best explanation.

According to this model, the theorist, confronted with a set of data to be explained, selects from a pool of live options that explanation which, if true, would best explain the data, where the worth of an explanation will be judged on the basis of such criteria as explanatory scope, explanatory power, etc . Now Johnson's fundamental point is that the neo-Darwinian paradigm can be said to be the best explanation only if the pool of live options is restricted to purely naturalistic explanations. But if one allows into the pool of live options supernatural explanations, that is,

explanations involving an extra-mundane intelligent agent, then it is by no means obvious that the neo-Darwinian explanation is the best.

Now whether one so restricts the pool of live options is a philosophical, not a scientific, question. Remarkably, I have seen statements from prominent naturalistic evolutionary biologists such as David Hull more or less admitting that Johnson is right. They insist that, of course, science excludes from the pool of live options supernaturalistic explanations; the very nature of science is to determine which is the best naturalistic explanation of the data. But that, as I say, is no longer a question of science but rather of the philosophy of science and one which scientists, who are typically invincibly naive when it comes to philosophy, are not well-equipped to address.

So all of us who choose to go into apologetics, whatever our area of specialization, would be well-advised to get a good serving in analytic philosophy under our belts.

In the end you may choose to specialize in some area other than philosophical apologetics. I've already mentioned historical apologetics, which explores the reliability of the New Testament witness to Jesus. Here evangelicals are well-represented by scholars like Craig Evans, Ben Witherington, Darrell Bock, N. T. Wright, and others in the Anglo-American realm, not to mention our Continental brethren. I've also mentioned scientific apologetics, where more evangelicals are needed, though folks like Robin Collins, George Ellis, Christopher Isham, William Dembski, and, on a popular level, Hugh Ross stand out as making important contributions. Another area of apologetics that has newly emerged as a vital field of specialization is Islamic studies. Actually, this is a very old field of apologetics dating back to Raymond Lull and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles* and perhaps even earlier. But it has assumed a critical importance since 9/11 with our heightened awareness of Islam and the challenge it presents. The website answeringislam.org furnishes excellent resources in this field, and an increasing number of popular works in the field are becoming available. Still other areas of specialization present themselves - psychology, for example, where Paul Vitz has done some interesting work - , but whatever fields there are, I encourage you to select one in which you can become expert so as to speak with confidence and authority on the issues.

Footnotes:

[1] Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 7.

[2] R. T. France, "The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity," *Truth* 1 (1985): 86.

[3] R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, "Introduction" to *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 2.

[4] David Friedrich Strauß, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, ed. with an Introduction by Peter C. Hodgson, Lives of Jesus Series (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 736.

[5] Funk, *et. al.*, "Introduction," p. 3.

[6] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[7] Gerd Lüdemann, "Die Auferstehung Jesu," in *Fand die Auferstehung wirklich statt?*, p. 16.

[8] Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 12.

[9] Thomas V. Morris, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion 5 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 3-4.

[10] Antony Flew in *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 4.

[11] Marcus Borg, "Seeing Jesus: Sources, Lenses, and Method," in *The Meaning of Jesus*, by Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1999), p. 7.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., p. 54.

[14] Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1997), pp. 48-9.