

Christian Apologetics: Who Needs It?

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SUMMARY

Recently, Dr. Craig had the privilege of delivering two lectures on Christian Apologetics for the Stob Lectures at Calvin Theological Seminary. In this talk, Dr. Craig describes what Christian apologetics is and three ways the discipline serves a vital role in the body of Christ—in its ability to shape culture, its capacity to strengthen believers, and its necessity when evangelizing unbelievers.

CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS: WHO NEEDS IT?

I am honored and deeply humbled by the privilege of being invited to give the Stob Lectures this year. Indeed, I'm a bit embarrassed by all the fuss you've made. There's a temptation to try to justify one's selection as the Stob lecturer by giving some hopefully impressive, scholarly pair of lectures. But a phone call from President Plantinga made it quite clear to me that such was consistent with neither the intended purpose nor the audience of these lectures. I had thought to speak on some key topics in Christian philosophical theology. But President Plantinga encouraged me instead to address the question of Christian apologetics, a topic apparently dear to the heart of Henry Stob but somewhat neglected in recent years. He encouraged me to draw upon my years of experience as a Christian apologist to share some very practical thoughts on this discipline. So that is what I've decided to do.

Tonight we ask ourselves the fundamental question: Christian apologetics—who needs it?

To begin with, I think we ought to distinguish between apologetics' necessity and utility. The distinction is important. For even if apologetics should turn out not to be absolutely necessary, it doesn't follow that it is therefore useless. For example, it's not necessary to know how to type in order to use a computer—you can hunt and peck, as I do—, but nevertheless typing skills are very useful in using a computer. Or again, it's not necessary to maintain your bicycle in order to go cycling, but it can be a real benefit to maintain a well-oiled machine. In the same way Christian apologetics can be of great utility even if it's not necessary for some end. Thus we need to ask concerning Christian apologetics not only, "Who needs it?" but also "What is it good for?"

Christian apologetics – Its definition

Christian apologetics may be defined as that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide rational warrant for Christianity's truth claims. Those who treat apologetics dismissively tend to measure apologetics' worth by focusing upon its alleged necessity in warranting Christian belief. Some thinkers, particularly in the Dutch Reformed tradition, see this role as unnecessary and sometimes even misguided.

Now I agree wholeheartedly with contemporary, so-called Reformed epistemologists like Alvin

Plantinga that apologetic arguments and evidence are *not* necessary in order for Christian belief to be warranted for any person. The contention of theological rationalists (or evidentialists, as they are misleadingly called today) that Christian faith is irrational in the absence of positive evidence is difficult to square with Scripture, which seems to teach that faith in Christ can be immediately grounded by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.14-16 ; 1 Jn. 2.27; 5.6-10), so that argument and evidence become unnecessary. I have elsewhere characterized the witness of the Holy Spirit as self-authenticating, and by that notion I mean (1) that the experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable (though not necessarily irresistible or indubitable) for the one who has it and attends to it; (2) that such a person does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know and to know with confidence that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God; (3) that such experience does not function in this case as a premise in any argument from religious experience to God, but rather is the immediate experiencing of God himself; (4) that in certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion, such as “God exists,” “I am reconciled to God,” “Christ lives in me,” and so forth; (5) that such an experience provides one not only with a subjective assurance of Christianity’s truth, but with objective knowledge of that truth; and (6) that arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit for the one who attends fully to it.

Christian evidentialists might insist that even if Christian belief can be warranted in the absence of positive apologetic arguments, still one must have at least the defensive apologetic resources to defeat the various objections with which one is confronted. But even that more modest claim is hasty, for if the witness of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life is sufficiently powerful (as it should be), then it will simply overwhelm the objections brought against that person’s Christian beliefs, thus obviating the need even for defensive apologetics. A believer who is too uninformed or ill-equipped to refute anti-Christian arguments is warranted in believing on the grounds of the witness of the Spirit even in the face of such unrefuted objections. Even a person confronted with what are for him unanswerable objections to Christian theism is, because of the work of the Holy Spirit, within his epistemic rights—nay, under epistemic obligation—to believe in God. Since beliefs grounded in the objective, veridical witness of the Spirit are part of the undefeated deliverances of reason, the believer’s faith is warranted even if he is wholly bereft of apologetic arguments (as is the case with most Christians today and throughout the history of the Church).

By contrast the Christian evidentialist faces severe difficulties: (1) He would deny the right to Christian faith to all who lack the ability, time, or opportunity to understand and assess the arguments and evidence. This consequence would no doubt consign untold millions of people who are Christians to unbelief. (2) Those who have been presented with more cogent arguments against Christian theism than for it would have a just excuse before God for their unbelief. But Scripture says that all men are without excuse for not responding to the revelation they have (Rom. 1:21). (3) This view creates a sort of intellectual elite, a priesthood of philosophers and historians, who will dictate to the masses of humanity whether or not it is rational for them to believe in the gospel. But surely faith is available to everyone who, in response to the Spirit’s

drawing, calls upon the name of the Lord. (4) Faith is subjected to the vagaries of human reason and the shifting sands of evidence, making Christian faith rational in one generation and irrational in the next. But the witness of the Spirit makes every generation contemporaneous with Christ and thus secures a firm basis for faith.

Christian apologetics – Its usefulness

So I do not, in fact, think that Christian apologetics is necessary in order for Christian belief to be warranted. But it does not follow that Christian apologetics is therefore useless or of no benefit in warranting Christian faith. If the arguments of natural theology and Christian evidences are successful, then Christian belief is warranted by such arguments and evidences for the person who grasps them, even if that person would still be warranted in their absence. Such a person is doubly warranted in his Christian belief, in the sense that he enjoys two sources of warrant.

One can envision great benefits of having such a dual warrant of one's Christian beliefs. Having sound arguments for the existence of a Creator and Designer of the universe or evidence for the historical credibility of the New Testament records of the life of Jesus in addition to the inner witness of the Spirit could increase one's confidence in the veracity of Christian truth claims. On Plantinga's epistemological model, at least, one would then have greater warrant for believing such claims. Greater warrant could in turn lead an unbeliever to come to faith more readily or inspire a believer to share his faith more boldly. Moreover, the availability of independent warrant for Christian truth claims apart from the Spirit's witness could help predispose an unbeliever to respond to the drawing of the Holy Spirit when he hears the Gospel and could provide the believer with epistemic support in times of spiritual dryness or doubt when the Spirit's witness seems eclipsed. One could doubtless think of many other ways in which the possession of such dual warrant for Christian beliefs would be beneficial.

So the question is: do natural theology and Christian evidences warrant Christian belief? I think that they do. In my published work I have formulated and defended versions of the cosmological, teleological, axiological, and ontological arguments for God's existence and have also defended theism against the most prominent objections lodged by atheist thinkers to belief in God, such as the problem of evil, the hiddenness of God, and the coherence of theism. Furthermore, I have argued for the authenticity of Jesus' radical personal claims and the historicity of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances to various individuals and groups, and the unexpected belief of the earliest disciples that God had raised him from the dead. Moreover, I have argued, using the standard criteria for assessing historical hypotheses, that the best explanation of these facts is the one given by the disciples themselves: God raised Jesus from the dead.

If these arguments are correct, then belief in Christian theism is warranted by natural theology and Christian evidences as well as by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. Thus while apologetic arguments are not necessary for knowledge that Christianity is true, still they are sufficient, and this dual warrant for Christian beliefs can be of great advantage. Hence, the success of Reformed

Epistemology and the failure of theological rationalism in no way imply that apologetics is useless or unimportant.

More than that: even if Christian apologetics is not necessary with respect to warranting Christian belief, Christian apologetics may be useful and even necessary with respect to various other ends. Permit me to mention three ends with respect to which Christian apologetics plays a vital role in their realization.

1. Christian apologetics is vital in shaping culture.

1. *Shaping culture.* Apologetics is useful and may well be necessary in order for the Gospel to be effectively heard in Western society today. In general Western culture is deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which introduced into European culture the leaven of secularism that has by now permeated the whole of Western society. The hallmark of the Enlightenment was “free thought,” that is, the pursuit of knowledge by means of unfettered human reason alone. While it is by no means inevitable that such a pursuit must lead to non-Christian conclusions and while most of the original Enlightenment thinkers were themselves theists, it has been the overwhelming impact of the Enlightenment mentality that Western intellectuals do not consider theological knowledge to be possible. Theology is not a source of genuine knowledge and therefore is not a science. Reason and religion are thus at odds with each other. The deliverances of the physical sciences alone are taken as authoritative guides to our understanding of the world, and the confident assumption is that the picture of the world which emerges from the genuine sciences is a thoroughly naturalistic picture. The person who follows the pursuit of reason unflinchingly toward its end will be atheistic or, at best, agnostic.

Why are these considerations of culture important? Simply because the Gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel which a person who is secularized will not. For the secular person you may as well tell him to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like our being approached on the street by a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement who invites us to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Bombay, such an invitation would, I assume, appear quite reasonable and be serious cause for reflection. I fear that evangelicals appear almost as weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, Stockholm, or Paris as do the devotees of Krishna.

What awaits us in North America, should our slide into secularism continue unabated, is already evident in Europe. Although the majority of Europeans retain a nominal affiliation with Christianity, only about 10% are practicing believers, and less than half of those are evangelical in theology. The most significant trend in European religious affiliation is the growth of those classed as “non-religious” from effectively 0% of the population in 1900 to over 22% today. As a result evangelism

is immeasurably more difficult in Europe than in the United States. Having lived for thirteen years in Europe, where I spoke evangelistically on university campuses across the continent, I can personally testify to how hard the ground is. It's difficult for the Gospel even to get a hearing. For example, I recall vividly that when I spoke at the University of Porto in Portugal, the students were so incredulous at the prospect of a Christian intellectual with doctoral degrees from two European universities that they suspected that I was actually an imposter. They even telephoned the University of Louvain in Belgium, where I was a visiting researcher, to confirm my affiliation with the university!

The US is following at some distance down this same road, with Canada somewhere in between. Canada's slide into secularism has been precipitous. In 1900 evangelicals represented 25% of the Canadian population. By 1989 Canadian evangelicals had plummeted to less than 8% of the population. My experience speaking on university campuses across Canada suggests to me that Canada embodies a sort of mid-Atlantic culture further along the road toward European secularism than its southern neighbor. Pluralism and relativism are the conventional wisdom at Canadian universities. Political correctness and laws regulating speech stifle debate on issues of ethical importance and serve as weapons to oppress Christian ideas and institutions. Canada's slide into secularism illustrates how important maintaining a cultural milieu sympathetic to Christian belief is to the effectiveness of evangelism. Fortunately, during the last decade Canadian evangelicals have begun to reverse this trend. But the climb back will be vastly more difficult than the downward slide because it will be in the teeth of a culture that has come to oppose the Christian worldview.

It is for that reason that Christians who depreciate the value of apologetics because "no one comes to Christ through intellectual arguments" are so short-sighted. For the value of apologetics extends far beyond one's immediate evangelistic contact. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. 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.

Unfortunately, Machen's warning went unheeded, and biblical Christianity retreated into the intellectual closets of cultural isolationism, from which we have only recently begun to re-emerge.

Now huge doors of opportunity stand open before us. We are living at a time when Christian philosophy is experiencing a veritable renaissance, revitalizing natural theology, at a time when science is more open to the existence of a transcendent Creator and Designer of the cosmos than at any time in recent memory, and at a time when biblical criticism has embarked upon a renewed quest of the historical Jesus which treats the Gospels seriously as valuable historical sources for

the life of Jesus and has confirmed the main lines of the portrait of Jesus painted in the Gospels. We are well-poised intellectually to help re-shape our culture in such a way as to regain lost ground, so that the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking people.

Now I can imagine some of you thinking, "But don't we live in a post-modern culture in which these appeals to traditional apologetic arguments are no longer effective? Since post-modernists reject the traditional canons of logic, rationality, and truth, rational arguments for the truth of Christianity no longer work. Rather in today's 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. The idea that we live in a post-modern culture is a myth. In fact a post-modern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. Nobody is a post-modernist when it comes to reading the labels on a medicine bottle versus a box of rat poison! You better believe that texts have objective meaning! People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. But, you see, that's not post-modernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line Positivism and Verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is just a matter of individual taste and emotive expression. We live in a cultural milieu which remains deeply modernist.

Indeed, I think that post-modernism is one of the craftiest deceptions that Satan has devised. "Modernism is dead," he tells us, "You need no longer fear it. Forget about it; it's dead and buried." Meanwhile modernism, pretending to be dead, comes back around again in the fancy new dress of post-modernism, masquerading as a new challenger. "Your old arguments and apologetics are no longer effective against this new arrival," we're told. "Lay them aside; they're of no use. Just share your narrative." Indeed, some, weary of the long battles with modernism, actually welcome the new visitor with relief. And so Satan deceives us into voluntarily laying aside our best weapons of logic and evidence, thereby ensuring unawares modernism's triumph over us. If we adopt this suicidal course of action, the consequences for the Church in the next generation will be catastrophic. Christianity will be reduced to but another voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each sharing its own narrative and none commending itself as the objective truth about reality, while scientific naturalism shapes our culture's view of how the world really is.

Now, of course, it goes without saying that in doing apologetics we should be relational, humble, and invitational; but that's hardly an original insight of post-modernism. From the beginning Christian apologists have known that we should present the reasons for our hope "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3.15). One needn't abandon the canons of logic, rationality, and truth in order to exemplify these biblical virtues.

And as for the idea that people in our culture are no longer interested in nor responsive to rational argumentation and evidence for Christianity, nothing could be farther from the truth. If I might be permitted to speak from my own experience, for over twenty years I've been speaking

evangelistically on university campuses in North America and Europe, sharing the Gospel in the context of presenting an intellectual defense of Christian truth claims. I always close my talks with a long time of Q & A. During all those years virtually no one has ever stood up and said something like, “Your argument is based on Western, chauvinistic standards of logic and rationality” or expressed some other post-modern sentiments. This just never happens. If you approach the questions on a rational level, people respond to them on a rational level. If you present scientific or historical evidence for a Christian truth claim, unbelieving students may argue with you about the facts—which is exactly what you want—, but they don’t attack the objectivity of science or history themselves. If you present a deductive argument for a Christian truth claim, unbelieving students may raise objections to your conclusion or premises—which is, again, precisely where the discussion should be—, but they don’t dispute your use of logic itself.

Now I do find that students can be suspicious of a Christian speaker. So they like to hear both sides of an issue presented. For that reason I’ve found debates to be an especially attractive forum for university evangelism. I competed for eight years in high school and collegiate debate activities, debating topics of public policy like the military assistance program, wage and price controls, and so forth. I never dreamt that debate would someday become a ministry activity. But shortly after finishing my theological doctorate, I began to receive invitations from Christian student groups in Canada to participate in debates on topics like “Does God Exist?,” “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?,” “Humanism vs. Christianity,” and so forth. And what I’ve discovered is that whereas a few score or maybe a couple hundred will come out to hear me give a campus talk, several hundred and even thousands of students will come to a debate where they can hear both sides presented. For example, 2,200 students at UC Riverside came out to hear my debate with Greg Cavin on the resurrection of Jesus. At the University of Wisconsin in Madison 4,000 students came out—on the night of a basketball game! —to hear Antony Flew and me debate the existence of God. Just this past February 3,000 students at the University of Iowa braved a blizzard that dumped seven inches of snow on campus to hear my debate with a local Religious Studies professor known for his vendetta against Christianity. Later in the spring of this year 3,000 students at Purdue University came out to listen to my debate with the young humanist philosopher Austin Dacey on the question “Does God Exist?” The approach in all these debates is that of rational argument and evidence. There is tremendous interest among students in hearing a balanced discussion of the reasons for and against Christian belief.

So don’t be deceived into thinking that people in our culture are no longer interested in the evidence for Christianity. Precisely the opposite is true. It is vitally important that we preserve a culture in which the Gospel is heard as a living option for thinking people, and apologetics will be front and center in helping to bring about that result.

2. Christian apologetics is vital in strengthening believers

2. Strengthening believers. Not only is apologetics vital to shaping our culture, but it also plays a vital role in the lives of individual persons. One of those roles will be strengthening believers.

Jan and I spent the summer of 1982 living in an apartment in Berlin, preparing for my oral examinations in theology at the University of Munich. I'd been preparing for over a year for these critical exams, and I had a pile of notes about a foot high which I had virtually memorized and reviewed daily in anticipation of the exam. During our time there we had the pleasure of entertaining Ann Kiemel and her new husband Will as they passed through Berlin. Now Ann was at that time one of the most popular Christian women's speakers in America. She was a unique individual, who would meet total strangers and seek to encourage them by singing little improvised ditties to them and sharing her faith. She was extremely sentimental and emotional. She would tell stories—some fictional, some true—that would reduce a whole audience of women to tears in minutes.

Well, as we were sitting around the table one day, I thought I'd try to learn some lessons based on her experience. "Ann," I asked, "How do you prepare for your messages?"

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

I was absolutely aghast. "*You don't prepare?*" I said.

"No," she answered.

I was utterly floored. "Well, then, what do you do?" I asked.

"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! Yet there was no doubting her effectiveness. She reached thousands of people with the Gospel. She told stories of how even hard-boiled academics were melted by her little ditties and stories and came to Christ. I thought, "Why am I doing all this when all you have to do is share your struggles?"

We returned to the States that fall to do a sabbatical at the University of Arizona in Tucson, when a former classmate lived. I shared with him one day about my conversation with Ann and told him how it had really taken the wind out of my sails. He said something to me that was very reassuring. He told me, "Bill, someday those people whom Ann Kiemel has brought to the Lord are going to need what you have to offer."

He was right. Emotions will carry you only so far, and then you're going to need something more substantive. Apologetics provides some of that substance. As I speak in churches around the country, I frequently meet parents who approach me after the service and say something like, "If only you'd been here two or three years ago! Our son (or our daughter) had questions about the faith which no one in the church could answer, and now he's lost his faith and is far from the Lord."

It just breaks my heart to meet parents like this. As I travel, I've also had the experience of meeting other people who've told me of how they had been prevented from apparent apostasy through reading an apologetic book or seeing a video of a debate. In their case apologetics has been the means by which God has brought about their perseverance in the faith. Now, of course, apologetics cannot guarantee perseverance, but it can help and in some cases may, in the

providence of God, even be necessary. Recently I had the privilege of speaking at Princeton University on arguments for the existence of God, and after my lecture I was approached by a young man who wanted to talk with me. Obviously trying to hold back the tears, he told me how a couple of years earlier he had been struggling with doubts and was on the brink of abandoning his faith. Someone then gave him a video of one of my debates. He said, "It saved me from losing my faith. I cannot thank you enough."

I said, "It was the Lord who saved you from falling."

"Yes," he replied, "but He used you. I can't thank you too much." I told him how thrilled I was for him and asked him about his future plans. "I'm graduating this year," he told me, "and I plan to go to seminary. I'm going into the pastorate." Praise God for the victory in this young man's life!

Other students I met with at Princeton were enrolled in a class taught by the New Testament critic Elaine Pagels which they nicknamed the "Faithbusters Class" because of its destructive effect on the faith of many Christian students. They had no way of knowing how far out of mainstream scholarship Prof. Pagels' views on the Gnostic gospels are. It was a privilege to share with them grounds for the credibility of the New Testament witness to Jesus.

Their experience is not unusual. In high school and college Christian teenagers are intellectually assaulted with every manner of non-Christian worldview coupled with an overwhelming relativism. If parents are not intellectually engaged with their faith and do not have sound arguments for Christian theism and good answers to their children's questions, then we are in real danger of losing our youth. It's no longer enough to teach our children simply Bible stories; they need doctrine and apologetics. It's hard to understand how people today can risk parenthood without having studied apologetics.

Unfortunately, our churches have also largely dropped the ball in this area. It's insufficient for youth groups and Sunday school classes to focus on entertainment and simpering devotional thoughts. We've got to train our kids for war. We dare not send them out to public high school and university armed with rubber swords and plastic armor. The time for playing games is past.

But Christian apologetics does much more than safeguard against lapses. The positive, upbuilding effects of apologetic training is even more evident. I see this all the time on the university campuses when I debate. John Stackhouse once remarked to me that these debates are really a Westernized version of what missiologists call a "power encounter." I think that's a perceptive analysis. Christian students come away from these encounters with a renewed confidence in their faith, their heads held high, proud to be Christians, and bolder in speaking out for Christ on their campus. Sometimes after a debate students will say, "I can't wait to share my faith in Christ!"

Many Christians do not share their faith with unbelievers simply out of fear. They're afraid that the non-Christian will ask them a question or raise an objection that they can't answer. And so they

choose to remain silent and thus hide their light under a bushel, in disobedience to Christ's command. Apologetics training is a tremendous boost to evangelism, for nothing inspires confidence and boldness more than knowing that one has good reasons for what one believes and good answers to the typical questions and objections that the unbeliever may raise. Sound training in apologetics is one of the keys to fearless evangelism.

In this and many other ways apologetics helps to build up the body of Christ by strengthening individual believers.

Christian apologetics is vital in evangelizing unbelievers.

3. *Evangelizing unbelievers.* Few people would disagree with me that apologetics strengthens the faith of Christian believers. But many will say that apologetics is not very useful in evangelism. "Nobody comes to Christ through arguments," they'll tell you. (I don't know how many times I've heard this said.)

Now this dismissive attitude toward apologetics' role in evangelism is certainly not the biblical view. As one reads the Acts of the Apostles, it is evident that it was the apostles' standard procedure to argue for the truth of the Christian view, both with Jews and pagans (*e.g.* , Acts 17:2-3, 17; 19:8; 28:23-24). In dealing with Jewish audiences, the apostles appealed to fulfilled prophecy, Jesus' miracles, and especially Jesus' resurrection as evidence that he was the Messiah (Acts 2:22-32). When they confronted Gentile audiences who did not accept the Old Testament, the apostles appealed to God's handiwork in nature as evidence of the existence of the Creator (Acts 14:17). Then appeal was made to the eyewitness testimony to the resurrection of Jesus to show specifically that God had revealed Himself in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:30-31 ; 1 Cor. 15:3-8).

Frankly, I think that those who regard apologetics as futile in evangelism just don't do very much evangelism. I suspect that they've tried using apologetic arguments on occasion and found that the unbeliever remained unconvinced. They then draw the sweeping conclusion that apologetics is ineffective in evangelism.

Now to a certain extent such folks are just victims of false expectations. When you reflect that only a minority of people who hear the Gospel will accept it and that only a minority of those who accept it do so for intellectual reasons, we shouldn't be surprised that the number of people with whom apologetics is effective is relatively small. By the very nature of the case, we should expect that most unbelievers will remain unconvinced by our apologetic arguments, just as most remain unmoved by the preaching of the cross.

Well, then, why bother with that minority of a minority with whom apologetics is effective? First, because every person is precious to God, a person for whom Christ died. Like a missionary called to reach some obscure people group, the Christian apologist is burdened to reach that minority of persons who will respond to rational argument and evidence.

But, second--and here the case differs significantly from the case of the obscure people group-- this people group, though relatively small in numbers, is huge in influence. One of these persons, for example, was C. S. Lewis. Think of the impact that one man's conversion continues to have! I find that the people who resonate most with my apologetic work tend to be engineers, people in medicine, and lawyers. Such persons are among the most influential in shaping our culture today. So reaching this minority of persons will yield a great harvest for the Kingdom of God.

In any case the general conclusion that apologetics is ineffective in evangelism is hasty. 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*. Nor, if I may speak personally, has it been my experience that apologetics is ineffective in evangelism. We continually are thrilled to see people committing their lives to Christ through apologetically-oriented presentations of the Gospel. After a talk on arguments for the existence of God or evidence for the resurrection of Jesus or a defense of Christian particularism, I'll sometimes conclude with a prayer of commitment to give one's life to Christ, and the comment cards indicate those who have registered such a commitment. Just this past spring I did a speaking tour of universities in central Illinois, and we were thrilled to find that almost every time I gave such a presentation, students indicated decisions for Christ. I've even seen students come to Christ just through hearing a defense of the *kalam* cosmological argument!

One of the most exciting was the case of Eva Drescher, a Polish physicist whom we met in Germany shortly after completing my philosophical doctorate. As Jan and I chatted with Eva, she mentioned that physics had destroyed her belief in God and that life had become meaningless to her. "When I look out at the universe all I see is blackness," she explained, "and when I look in myself all I see is blackness within." (What a poignant statement of the modern predicament!) Well, at that point Jan volunteered, "Oh, you should read Bill's doctoral dissertation! He uses physics to prove God exists." So we lent her my dissertation on the cosmological argument to read. Over the ensuing days, she became progressively more excited. When she got to the section on astronomy and astrophysics, she was positively elated. "I *know* these scientists that you are quoting!" she exclaimed in amazement. By the time she reached the end, her faith had been restored. "Thank you for helping me to believe that God exists," she said.

We answered, "Would you like to know Him in a personal way?" Then we made an appointment to meet her that evening at a restaurant. Meanwhile we prepared from memory our own hand-printed Four Spiritual Laws. After supper we opened the booklet and began, "Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern your relationship to God...."

"Why, physical laws! Spiritual laws!" she exclaimed. "This is just for me!" When we got to the circles at the end representing two lives and asked her which circle represented her life, she put her hand over the circles and said, "Oh, this is so personal! I cannot answer now." So we encouraged her to take the booklet home and to give her life to Christ.

When we saw her the next day, her face was radiant with joy. She told us of how she had gone home and in the privacy of her room prayed to receive Christ. She then flushed all the wine and tranquilizers that she had been on down the toilet. She was a truly transformed person. We gave her a *Good News* Bible and explained the importance of maintaining a devotional life with God. Our paths then parted for several months. But when we saw her again she was still enthusiastic in her faith, and she told us that her most precious possessions were her Good News Bible and her hand-made Four Spiritual Laws. It was one of the most vivid illustrations I've seen of how the Holy Spirit can use arguments and evidence to draw people to a saving knowledge of God.

It has been thrilling, too, to hear stories of how people have come to Christ through reading something I've written. For example, when I was speaking in Moscow a few years ago I met a man from Minsk in Belarus. He told me that shortly after the fall of communism he had heard someone reading in Russian my book *The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe* over the radio in Minsk. By the end of the broadcast he had become convinced that God exists and yielded his life to Christ. He told me that today he is serving the Lord as an elder in a Baptist Church in Minsk. Praise God! Earlier this year at Texas A & M University, I met a woman attending one of my talks. She told me with tears that for 27 years she had been far away from God and was feeling hopeless and meaningless. Browsing in a Border's Bookstore she then ran across my book *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*, which contains my debate with John Dominic Crossan, co-chairman of the radical Jesus Seminar, and bought a copy. She said that as she read it, it was as though the light just came on and she gave her life to Christ. When I asked her what she does, she told me that she is a psychologist who works in a Texas prison for women. Just think of the Christian influence she can have in so desperate an environment!

If I may, one last story: The last few years I've had the privilege of being involved in debates with Islamic apologists on various university campuses in Canada and the States. This summer, early one Saturday morning, I received a telephone call. The voice on the other end announced, "Hello! This is Sayd al-Islam calling from Oman!" I thought, "Oh, no! They found me!" He went on to explain that he had secretly lost his Muslim faith and had become an atheist. But now by reading various Christian apologetic works, which he was ordering on Amazon.com, he had come to believe in God and was on the verge of making a commitment to Christ. He was impressed with the evidence for Jesus' resurrection and had called me because he had several questions he still needed to settle. We talked for an hour, and I sensed that in his heart he had already come to believe in Christ; but he wanted to be cautious and be sure he had the evidence in place before he consciously made that step. He explained to me, "You understand that I cannot tell you my real name. In my country I must lead a sort of double-life because otherwise I would be killed." I prayed with him that God would continue to guide him into truth, and then we said goodbye. You can imagine how full of thanks my heart was to God for using these books—and for the internet!—in the life of this man! Stories like this could be multiplied, and, of course, we never hear most of them.

So those who say that apologetics is not effective with unbelievers must be speaking out of their

limited experience. When apologetics is persuasively presented and sensitively combined with a Gospel presentation and a personal testimony, the Spirit of God condescends to use it in bringing certain people to Himself. Is apologetics necessary in such cases? Would these people have come to Christ anyway, even if they had not heard the arguments? I think we have to say, "Only God knows!" At least, He does if He has middle knowledge, right? We may not know the truth-value of such counterfactuals of freedom; but we can and do know by experience that God uses apologetics in evangelism to bring lost people to Himself.

So in conclusion, Christian apologetics is a vital part of the theological curriculum. While not necessary for warranting Christian belief, it is, I believe, nonetheless sufficient for warranting Christian belief and therefore of great benefit. Apologetics plays a vital, and perhaps crucial, role in shaping culture, strengthening believers, and evangelizing unbelievers. For all these reasons, I am unapologetically enthusiastic about Christian apologetics.

1 I think that Reformed epistemologists such as Alvin Plantinga have been able to offer an epistemological model, which, if Christian theism is true, shows how Christian belief can be warranted in the absence of apologetic arguments. I should only adjust that model for the purposes of Christian theology by eliminating the so-called *sensus divinitatis*, which finds no basis in Scripture, in favor of the *testimonium Spiritu Sancti internum*, or inner witness of the Holy Spirit, which is attested in Scripture. Moreover, rather than taking the Spirit's witness to be a belief-forming process analogous to a cognitive faculty (a construal which makes it difficult to hold that it is literally true that "I believe in God," since the faculty or process is not mine), I should understand the Spirit's witness to be either a form of testimony borne by God's Spirit to me or else a part of the circumstances that ground the belief which I form in God and the great truths of the Gospel.

2 Some Reformed epistemologists, while endorsing the arguments of natural theology, have nevertheless expressed scepticism with respect to the prospects of historical apologetics because as one adds more specificity to one's hypothesis the probability of that hypothesis rapidly diminishes. Such an objection is, however, doubly misconceived. First, the probabilities need not diminish and may actually increase if one progressively adds additional specific evidence to one's background information as the hypotheses are refined. The error of the objection is that it holds the evidence base constant while adding additional hypotheses, instead of increasing the evidence as one hones in on specifically Christian beliefs. Second, in any case historians do not typically assess historical hypotheses by means of the probability calculus. Rather they use such criteria of assessment as explanatory scope, explanatory power, degree of *ad hoc*-ness, and so forth. This is the means by which I have argued for the superiority of the Resurrection hypothesis.