

The Reason for Our Hope: Christ in Our Apologetics

Part 2

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In the previous article, which was the first part of a speech on Christ in our apologetics, we focused on the meaning of First Peter 3:15, where the apostle admonishes Christians always to be ready to give an accounting of the hope that is in them. We saw how he assumes that this is the sort of defense that would stand up in court and would thus be coherent, rational, and compelling. Further, the apostle teaches us to be ready to offer such an accounting or justification in all kinds of circumstances. Our lives ought to evoke questions from others because we live in such a future-oriented way, without the fear of man. Christ himself really is our hope because he, in his perfect person, possesses the fullness which we desire and which we in faith believe will be ours. When I reflect on Peter's encouragement and consider what might be our task in doing and teaching apologetics, I came up with seven reflections. More would be possible, but these seven are the most critical.

- (1) First, the gospel is that Jesus Christ died to take the punishment due to us for our sins and then rose from the dead to live and rule forever. Every believer can testify to this. Apologetics commends and defends the history and truth of this gospel. Peter's admonition teaches us that we should also equip ourselves better to defend and commend this gospel by studying apologetics. Hence we now have a course in apologetics at CRTS.
- (2) Second, God himself has rooted the Christian faith in history. For all the major acts of salvation, from the exodus to Pentecost, God has supplied witnesses whose testimony is recorded in Scripture (e.g., Lk 1:1–4; Jo 1:14; 21:24; 1Jo 1:1–4). They did not make up cleverly-invented stories (2Pe 1:16–18). You believe real things that really happened, done by a God who really exists and who is coming again.
- (3) This historical rootedness leads us, thirdly, to the centrality of the resurrection, for of this event Paul reminds us in First Corinthians 15:6 that more than 500 believers were assembled together and saw the Christ in person after his resurrection. When he adds

that most of them are still living, he is challenging any doubters to go and ask the witnesses. The faith is verifiable. The events of our salvation really happened.

We could even say this: Given all the evidence, it is unreasonable of people not to believe in the resurrection. Their only choice, in rejecting the resurrection, is to accuse the entire church of the first century of a giant cover up. But then they have the problem of explaining why so many people would die for a lie.¹

(4) Fourth, given this historical rootedness and its role in convincing the first witnesses and earliest readers, we should not entirely discount the role of evidence and argument in our coming to faith today. True believers know from Scripture and experience that faith comes by hearing Christ proclaimed (Ro 10:14–15; 1Pe 1:22–25). Faith is the gift of God (Eph 2:8). I emphatically affirm this. But the way in which God leads people to hearing Christ and thus to faith includes means. Those means could include an empirical investigation. It could make others more open to consider the gospel when they read references to Jesus in Roman authors like Suetonius and Tacitus, or in the Jewish writer Josephus. Likewise unbelievers who rely on false assumptions about the composition and canonization of the New Testament à la Dan Brown can be helped simply with the facts. Objections that touch people's lives such as the problem of evil can be discussed empathically and shown to be answerable within a Christian view of the world. All these discussions have a place in apologetics. God is active in the whole process of study, questions and answers, objections and rebuttals, tests of reason and logic. The Lord uses it all. Whatever is true is true because he made it so. We may acknowledge truth wherever it is found and then point to God as the deepest source and ultimate end of all truth. Herman Bavinck taught us this very well.

Such apologetic defenses even play a role in the lives of our teenagers who are learning the faith. They desire reasonable explanations and answers, and usually these can be supplied by mature believers. We call this internal apologetics—internal to the church.

¹ This point is ably made by Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 210–11.

- (5) Fifth, apologetics includes both defense and offense. In Philippians 1:7 Paul writes about “defending and confirming the gospel.” Positively, the prophets and apostles were not ashamed of the gospel because “it is the power of God unto salvation” (Ro 1:16) but negatively they also used divine weapons to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.” Overall, they sought to “make every thought obedient to Christ” (2Co 10:4–5).
- (6) Sixth, when Peter exhorts us to give an explanation for the hope that is within us, he lays the foundation for what became known in the church as “faith seeking understanding.”² Peter considered our hope to be firmly in place because Christ rose and because we are believers in him. We have faith in Christ, who is our hope. By faith we hold onto our hope, our anchor (He 6:18). But that faith employs reason in its service. It seeks to connect the various points of faith, to deepen our knowledge of them, to defend the faith against attacks, etc. When an unbeliever agrees with one teaching but not another, we can use the agreed teaching to show how it entails agreement with the one that is denied.³
- (7) Finally, here’s the definition we used at CRTS, taken from James Beilby: “Apologetics is the task of defending and commending the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a Christlike, context sensitive, audience-specific manner.”⁴ This is CRTS’s first foray into apologetics. It’s in the spirit of Herman Bavinck more than Cornelius Van Til. We seek to heed—and help our students and the churches they will serve also heed—the apostolic admonition always to be ready to give an accounting for Christ, our hope.

By God’s grace we have been blessed to train students for the ministry here at CRTS now for some 45 years. The Lord has richly blessed us. We continue to seek his blessing as we prepare men who will train up the congregations of Christ to walk and talk in faith. May the Lord richly bless you as you pray and work to be faithful in being a living witness of Jesus Christ!

² The church father Augustine and the early medieval theologian Anselm particularly advanced this tenet.

³ This point is superbly made by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.8.

⁴ James K. Beilby, *Thinking about Christian Apologetics: What It Is and Why We Do It* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 31.