

# The Reason for Our Hope: Christ in Our Apologetics

## Part 1

By Dr. Theodore G. (Ted) Van Raalte

The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary has finally become Canadian. This is not about saying “eh” but it’s close. You are Canadian, so you understand. Here’s the story: One year ago at CRTS we read the online issue of a Harvard study in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. It said that statistics show that superfluous apologies demonstrate empathic concern and increase trust.<sup>1</sup> In so-called layman’s terms: The authors found that people who say, “I’m sorry” about everything are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and likeable. If you ask a stranger, “Can I borrow your cell phone?” they’ll probably say no. But if you apologize and say, “I’m sorry. May I use your cell phone for a moment?” they’re more likely to let you. Well, we are Canadian, we want our graduates to be likeable, *we’re sorry* to require this even of our foreign students, but from now on all students must take our course in apologizing.

When you see the word “apologetics,” you instantly notice the word “apology” inside it. But, as it happens, the semantic range of the word “apology” varies from saying, “I’m sorry,” to giving a reasoned explanation and defense of what you believe. It’s of course the latter meaning that we’re about to discuss tonight.

The topic is fitting because from January to May of 2014 the first course in apologetics was crafted and taught at CRTS. We really had a good time together as we considered the biblical basis of apologetics, the varieties of it, the history of it, and special topics such as what kind of common ground there is between believers and unbelievers (for which Herman Bavinck is helpful), and what is the transcendental critique of Cornelius Van Til. After that we developed answers to selected objections raised against the Christian faith. The final exam consisted in a half-hour oral exam for each student in which they had to counter objections and give explanations for the hope that is in them. In other words, they had to practice apologetics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alison Wood Brooks, Hengchen Dai, and Maurice E. Schweitzer, “‘I’m Sorry About the Rain!’: Superfluous Apologies Demonstrate Empathic Concern and Increase Trust,” in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5:4 (May 2014), 467–74 (first published online September 26, 2013).

This is exactly what our reading from Peter's first letter calls on us to do. His admonition is our starting point for the course and the topic of my talk tonight.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (First Peter 3:15, NIV84).

When Peter writes that we are to give an answer for our hope, he is saying that our hope, which is secure in Christ, has explanations. We can supply the reason for our hope when someone asks us. The idea is that when we make a defense we can give explanations, validations, accountings, justifications, rationales, or reasons for our hope. Our hope is not irrational, illogical, beyond words, mysterious, inexpressible, or unexplainable. Rather, we can give an accounting and we should always be ready with reasons. Negatively, you can answer objections. Positively, you can argue in favour of your hope. If you have the truth, then by its very nature, it is rational, subject to explanation. The apostle isn't saying that we can have comprehensive knowledge of every aspect of the faith. Many things go beyond our understanding. Yet we should not be afraid but always be ready to give an answer or defense to anyone who asks us for the explanation of our heart's hope. That's the basic message of God's Word here.

The text has (1) Christ as Lord, (2) our hope, (3) people asking the reason for our hope, and (4) we giving a defense by supplying the reason or explanation.

(1) The opening statement that Christ is Lord is designed to bolster our confidence. When some person threatens us—be he our neighbour or our king—we know that we have a higher Lord, far more mighty than they. We are in fact so closely joined to him that we can act with clemency (Phlp 4:6) and gentleness (1Pe 3:16), prerogatives of a king. They may persecute us, but in fact the higher power and authority is on our side. He conquers all, either with love or with justice. Set apart in your hearts your Messiah, the Christ, as your Master. None is greater.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> There appears to be an Old Testament background for First Peter 3:14–15 in Isaiah 8:12–13. Peter here applies equally to Christ what referred in Isaiah to Yahweh. Isaiah 8:14 was used by Peter also, in First Peter 2:8.

(2) The next thing, our hope, is something very important in Peter's letters. Already in 1:3 he writes how the Father "gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." By your new birth you have come into what we might call the family of living hope. The hope is living because Christ is living. The hope is the thing ahead of us. Christ blazed the trail to the new creation. Hebrews 6:18 says that believers flee to take hold of the hope set before us. Colossians 1:5 speaks of the hope stored up for us in heaven. This hope is not a wish, such as, "I hope it won't rain tonight." It's not just a feeling or something in your head, but a real thing outside of you. This hope already exists in fullness in Jesus Christ. In First Peter 1:4 this hope is parallel to "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for us." This hope is not a mere wish, but a reality. Nothing can assault it. No matter our situation as pilgrims here on earth, the hope is certain and immovable. Faith reaches forward to it.

In fact, even now that hope is ours. The NIV84 text says it is "the hope that you have." The original Greek is stronger, "the hope that is in you." This doesn't just mean an inner feeling. The hope is living because Christ is living. He is in heaven. But by faith he is found alive in us also. Just as we set him apart as Lord "in our hearts" so also this hope—focused in Christ—is within us. Christ is in us by his Spirit. He's our hope.

(3) That hope is so real for us, so strong, that it affects the way we live every day. A life with the foundation of hope gives rise to questions. Christ is in us by his Spirit, he orients us toward the future, and so we live like we belong somewhere else where righteousness, peace, and love rule the day. We submit to authority. We live in marriage in a holy and thus happy way. We love one another and others. We even suffer for our eagerness to do good. We do it for God's glory. All this makes us shine like stars in this dark world, stars who bask in and reflect the wonderful light of the Lord (Phlp 2:15; 1Pe 2:9). In all kinds of situations, whenever someone should ask about the hope that is in you, why you shine this way, you are expected to give an explanation, to defend your Lord and his Word, to show how your way of living makes sense from the perspective of faith in Christ.

Thus far, then, we have Christ as Lord, a secure hope drawn within us, and a new way of life which gives rise to questions. What about our response?

(4) Out of our hope we must give a defense or an answer, an explanation. The Greek word is *apologia*, hence “apologetics.” Since it is a living hope that was obtained through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1:3), the centre of our defense will be about his resurrection.

This answer or *apologia* is the word used in Greek for an official defense in court. Peter’s fellow apostle Paul made several such defenses (Phlp 1:7,16; 2Tim 4:16). He appealed to Caesar. This shows that the defense Peter has in mind is convincing and rational. Our faith is not a secret mystery, but is proclaimed from the mountaintops, verifiable in history, and rationally coherent. A defense in court implies all this. Yet Peter applies his exhortation to all occasions and circumstances, whenever our out-of-this-world style of living gives rise to questions. We will explain that we live this way because of Christ our hope.

When we give a defense, we are therefore going to be talking about Christ. The *reason* for the hope that is in us is the explanation or justification or vindication of the way we act. We are not irrational to endure persecution; rather, it’s all very reasonable, for our lives go way beyond this visible world. We have a power source that is extra-terrestrial. Faith is holding onto such a secure hope that we even have joy in the midst of suffering. Our responses are mind-blowing to unbelievers, but quite justified and reasonable in light of the miraculous work of Christ.

And yet, as reasonable as it is, no one can accept these reasons unless they believe. Faith comes first. When we give a reason for the hope that is in us, and both the hope and the reason for it are in Christ, both are matters of faith.

Does this mean that apologetics is limited to preaching the gospel? After all, preaching forms faith, as Peter also reminds us in 1:22–25. This is an important question, for if apologetics is limited to preaching, we have no justification for making it a separate course at CRTS. How does apologetics differ from preaching? Well, Peter imagines it being used in all kinds of situations by all Christians, not just preachers on the pulpit. It is also interactive and filled with reasons. Everyone one of us is expected to be an apologist, for he exhorts us to be ready always. We all should know why we hope in Christ. Our way of life shouldn’t just be a meaningless routine, a mere custom, going through the motions. We must understand the gospel. The reason for our

hope should be convincing enough to make our opponents ashamed because of their slander, as Peter writes in verse 16.

The question for us then is: Do you know the gospel? Can you defend your faith? Are you equipping yourself to do this? This hope you have, my brothers and sisters, can be probed and studied, known better and enjoyed very much, and therefore also explained and accounted for with other people. Have you ever done that? Is your life radical enough to give rise to their questions? Would there be enough evidence in court to convict you of being a Christian? Those are serious points that we all need to ponder.

We should also ask ourselves how much we really delight in the gospel. Is it really your hope? Is the real stuff of your life your fillet mignon with a glass of cabernet sauvignon? Do you live for that yearly holiday cruise? Or is Jesus Christ your hope? Everyone can talk for a long time about what's their passion. So the question for us is whether Christ as Lord really is what we're passionate about. Is he really your hope? Do you live like your real life source is from a different realm, from Christ, and in that sense like you are a stranger here? Do you delight in him like nothing else? If you can say *yes* then I am certain you can also account for that hope. You can do apologetics. The Holy Spirit will help you, as Jesus promised, especially in times of stress and persecution (Mt 10:19–20). Whoever acknowledges Jesus before men will be acknowledged by Jesus before our Father in heaven, but whoever disowns him will be disowned (Mt 10:32–33). With all the seriousness of the holy calling God has laid upon me, I ask myself and all of you, “Is Jesus Christ your only hope in this world?” “Is there evidence that you have been born again into a living hope?” I pray you will improve upon this point, as must I. And I command you, as did Peter, “Be ready always to give a reason for the hope that you have!”

If God has been gracious to us, we now understand not just the meaning of the text, but also its significance for us.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are a few further reflections with respect to apologetics. Next time we'll consider seven of these.

---

<sup>3</sup> For the distinction between meaning (possible for all people) and significance (possible only for the regenerated) as regards Scripture, see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 136–7, 153, 172, 176.