

Benefiting from Apologetics

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WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

One of my favorite responsibilities at the church is to answer Bible and theology questions.

- You are welcome to email me your questions (joshk@hisplacechurch.com).
- Your questions may end up as a sermon!

I've noticed a trend; most of the questions I'm asked are about apologetics. Apologetics does not mean being sorry for being a Christian. The word "apologetics" comes straight from the Bible:

... always *be* ready to *give* a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you— 1 Peter 3:15 NKJV

- Apologetics defends Christianity against distortion.
- Apologetics provides evidence of its credibility.

Apologetics answers questions like: Is the Bible trustworthy? How can we say Jesus is the only way to God? Is Christianity more reasonable than other religions?

- Apologetics is for every believer, not just debaters.
- You, in fact, are practicing apologetics every time you describe your faith or live your Christian life before a non-Christian.

If you have ever asked me an apologetics question, have heard my mini-sermon about how to use apologetics, about what apologetics can do and what it can't do, its benefits and limitations.

- This morning, I get to give you the full sermon.

A DEFINING MOMENT

When I was 16, I was invited meet with some Mormon missionaries. So I listened to Dr. Walter Martin tapes, grabbed my buddy Jay TenBrink (our missionary to Mexico), and went to show them the error of their ways.

Our first meeting was with a missionary and his apprentice. We hit them with our best material, but got nowhere. The next meeting was with two older missionaries, and we still got nowhere. Our third meeting was with a gentleman who probably had joined the Mormon church when I was in diapers.

- And we really got nowhere. Let add, they were all very friendly, not badgering - I was the biggest jerk there!
- Let me also say, my material was sound; I still stand by the content and I do believe they were in error.

We all agreed that no one was changing anyone's mind, which was true. I thought it had all been a complete waste of time. Even though I didn't change anyone's mind, I was wrong about that.

- God used this as a defining moment of my life.
- Apologetics will never force someone to believe what they don't want to believe.

Hanging out with me wasn't a waste of time for Jay either - he ended up marrying my sister. It started out, "Josh, mind if Faith joins us." Pretty soon it was, "Faith, mind if Josh tags along.

- Faith was riding shotgun, and I got the rumble seat, futilely arguing with the Mormon missionary.

APOLOGETIC'S LIMITATION

There, at the age of 16, I learned a lesson I have never forgotten, though I have had to relearn on several occasions. I learned the limitation of apologetics.

- You cannot argue anyone into the Kingdom of God.

When given all the facts, a person will believe whatever they want to believe. There is a prime example of this in the Bible that would be comical if it weren't so telling.

What better proof could you find of Jesus' authority than raising someone from the dead? So how do you think Jesus' detractors responded when he raised Lazarus from the dead?

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well....-- *John 12:9-10 NIV*

So they decided to kill Lazarus; talk about destruction of evidence!

- All the proof in the world can only help someone believe in Jesus if they want to believe in him.

The enemy has spent years building up defenses in a person against God. All apologetics can do is tear down that defense, weapon by weapon.

- If they don't want God, they'll just pick up another weapon.

THE HARDER YOU PUSH, THE HARDER I'LL RUN

Apologetics misused can actually drive a person further from God, because no one likes to be badgered, pushed, or harassed.

I once was discussing theology with another Christian and I decided to play devil's advocate, presenting a non-Christian's perspective. Apparently he missed the point.

I found myself being attacked with all the arguments he had just learned at Bible College. I ceased to be a person and became a conquest, a prospective convert.

- I found myself getting really annoyed – and I agreed with him!
- No one wants to be treated as a conquest or prospective convert.
- Apologetics minus relationship often equals harassment.

WHICH BRIDGE?

So the limitation of apologetics is that it cannot coerce anyone in to God's kingdom. But what are its benefits? I see apologetics having two indispensable functions.

Imagine you are running from a gushing flow of molten lava and you are coming up on a wide, deep chasm. There's no way around, but you see there are several rope bridges crossing the chasm.

One bridge is missing half of its planks, one's cables are frayed to a strand, and another is anchored in sand. But the last one is anchored in cement, it has a thick cable, and all of its planks. But it is still a long, narrow, swaying rope bridge.

- Staying where you are is not an option.
- You must choose the safest bridge to cross.

APOLOGETICS BENEFITS BELIEVERS

The first function of apologetics is helping believers know they have made the wisest choice and they are on the safest bridge.

Christianity is part reason and part faith. I have studied the options, and I am convinced that this is the only bridge that will get me across.

But when I am halfway there and the wind picks up and the bridge sways and shakes, because that is what rope bridges do, it becomes very easy to doubt my decision.

- Apologetics confirms to our mind that we're on the right bridge.
- Faith tells our heart to hold fast to what our mind believes.

Apologetics prepares the believer for the storms of doubt. Every believer benefits personally from studying the reasons and reasonability of Christianity.

APOLOGETICS BENEFITS THE INTERESTED UNBELIEVER

The second function of apologetics is helping the unbeliever who is interested in knowing God, but finds his or her preconceived notions getting in the way.

Apologetics is standing at that chasm, explaining to others why this particular bridge is safe and the others are not. According to the passage we read, this is every believer's obligation.

Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against

your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. – 1 Peter 3:15-16
NIV

Peter shows us five elements of an effective, God-honoring *apologia*.

1. It must be *Rehearsed*. Defending our faith requires study and preparation. I have a resources list in the back.
2. It must be *Ready*. Notice we are supposed to wait to be asked, not shove down the throat of every unsuspecting prospective convert.
3. It must be *Reasonable*, thought out. If we wanted to know which bridge to take, we wouldn't want to hear "I like this one best because it makes me feel good."
 - We would want a thought out conclusion based on careful, honest investigation and examination.
4. It must be *Respectful*. Not arrogantly belittling those who disagree, not ramming our beliefs down their throats. Jesus treated unbelievers with great respect.
5. It must be *Represented*. The most compelling argument for (or against!) Christianity is Christians.
 - A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God.

WHAT GOD EXPECTS OF US

This may seem a daunting task to you. But rest assured, you're not expected to have all the answer. You're not all expected to be the next C. S. Lewis or Lee Stroble.

- You're not even expected to know who those guys are!
- Sometimes "I don't know" is the best answers you can give.

You are expected to understand your faith as best you can. You expected to give the best answer you can and point people to find the answers you can't give.

- Most of all, you are expected to live a life that makes it easier to believe in God.