



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## A Case for a Christian Apology

Identifying/Clarifying Premises

### *Introduction*

1. I'll begin with a few experiences with students I taught from which I hope you'll begin to get a sense of what is involved in "Christian Evidences."
  - a. A HS sophomore who asked one of the best questions I have ever been asked in a class, during our unit on creation/evolution: "Mr. Anguish, what would you do if a real evolutionist came in here?"
  - b. A HS junior who asked where I was getting material I attributed to atheists. What he was really suggesting was that I was answering a straw man with my defense. The next day, we read excerpts from avowed atheists.<sup>1</sup>
  - c. HS juniors the summer & fall after I taught them: One, a Congressional page in Washington, D.C., called me at about 11:00 p.m. one summer evening. The other, studying in a German HS while his professor dad was on a study sabbatical, wrote me a letter. Their question was virtually the same: "My fellow students here don't believe; I know we talked about it in class, but I need help. What do I do?"
  - d. Two freshmen at an SEC university returning to our Christian school campus as alumni. "We're not getting challenged in our science classes; it's in history and literature" (later confirmed by a young lady with a similar experience at the University of Memphis).
2. Some questions suggested/prompted by the above.
  - a. Are our teaching programs (and youth ministries) preparing us (and our youth) for the challenges to faith posed by our world it currently presents?<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Is our faith *owned* or *inherited*?<sup>3</sup> Which are we instilling in our children/converts?<sup>4</sup>
  - c. Do we know how and where our world is like/different that of the first Christians?
  - d. Do we know how the Scriptures can prepare us, how its different parts (especially of the New Testament) respond to the challenges we now face (in principles if not details)?
  - e. Do we know how they presented their case? What they stressed? How strongly they stressed it? How seriously they took defending it?
  - f. Are we engaging with our world where it is, or have we retreated to a "Christian cocoon"?
3. In light of the above, I submit that we need a big picture view before dealing with any specific issue; that fits the introductory nature of these lessons.
  - a. In part 1, I will introduce some broad principles or premises about the task before us.

- b. In part 2, I'll present the overview of a case for Christ in light of the New Testament's emphasis on our faith as a matter of historical record.

### Body

- I. Christians have always experienced the need and call to present an *apology* for the faith.
  - A. "Apology" here is used in the sense it is found in the NT, Justin Martyr,<sup>5</sup> and other early Christians.
    - 1. Greek ἀπολογία (*apologia*)/ἀπολογέομαι (*apologeomai*): defense, reasoned statement or argument, reply or answer. in a court of law; offer justification in a broader sense.
      - a) ἀπολογία: Acts 22:1; 25:16; 1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Cor. 7:11; Phil. 1:7, 16; 2 Tim. 4:16; 1 Pet. 3:15.
      - b) ἀπολογέομαι: Luke 12:11; 21:14; Acts 19:33; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1, 2, 24; Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 12:19.
  - B. In Philippians 1:7, Paul used the word "confirmation" alongside defense.
    - 1. "Confirmation" — βεβαίωσις (*bebaiōsis*): confirmation, guarantee; anchor, being reliable, dependable, certain of, making firm, establishing, with an oath,, security.
    - 2. Key Texts.
      - a) βέβαιος: Rom. 4:16; 2 Cor. 1:7; Heb. 2:2; 3:6, 14; 6:19; 9:17; 2 Pet. 1:10, 19.
      - b) βεβαιώω: Mark 16:20; Rom. 15:8; 1 Cor. 1:6, 8; 2 Cor. 1:21; Col. 2:7; Heb. 2:3; 13:9.
      - c) βεβαίωσις: Phil. 1:7; Heb. 6:16.
    - 3. Two sides to what was involved in confirmation emerge from these passages:
      - a) Making sure the message of the gospel.
      - b) Making sure a believer's faith.
  - C. It is important to see this theme and how purposeful they were about offering a defense (see the imperatives in 1 Peter 3:15 and the assumption of Justin and others in writing).
    - 1. It is biblical to show *why* we call people to "the Way" (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22).
    - 2. It also strengthens our faith (see Acts 14:22; 16:4-5; also 15:32, 41; 18:21).
- II. Christians should think about similarities and differences between our world and theirs and what those mean for defending and confirming faith.
  - A. What challenged their faith?
    - 1. Throughout the entirety of the NT period (and for two centuries afterward), they were a *minority* (later illegal!) religion in a world where new religions were suspect precisely because they were new.<sup>6</sup>
    - 2. Consider what Acts shows us about who they faced.
      - a) Judaism – native Hebrew & Greek – Acts 2, 3, 6, 8, 13.
      - b) Moralists – Acts 10 (Cornelius).
      - c) Idolaters, polytheists – Acts 14, 16, 19.
      - d) Some who knew Jesus, but not well enough – Acts 18:24-19:7.
      - e) People who pressed for a legalist hybrid of Judaism and Christianity – Acts 15.
      - f) Philosophical skeptics – Acts 17.<sup>7</sup>
  - B. A world both like and different from theirs.
    - 1. There are similarities.
      - a) Every religion *type* existed then (and some of our "new" things are rooted in or revivals of things they faced; see e.g., the website for Gnosticism, [gnosis.org](http://gnosis.org)).

- b) Problem: it is possible to assume that an issue or movement we face that was not part of our grandparents' culture would not have been faced by Christians of the first century or any age. Better study of ancient history will reveal that, in principle at least, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9).
- 2. In other ways, much of what we face is not *specifically* the same as in the first century.
  - a) "Atheism" then (when the Christians were called "atheists" because they rejected polytheism) and now (when we face the fervor of the "new atheists" — whose arguments often are not really new).
  - b) Postmodernism now (a correction and rejection of modernism, but also as a rejection of absolutes).
  - c) Some "Eastern" religions take different forms now, but follow the same philosophies as ancient religions from the East did.
  - d) Even Islam fits in this part of our discussion: it began in the 600s A. D., but reflects a religion type[s] that already existed.
- 3. This should be seen as evidence that apologetics encompasses far more than the three-part outline of the classic introduction to Christian evidences class.
- 4. We have our Apolloses (Acts 18:24-28), but also our Athenians (17:16-34) and others as well.
- C. This is the "table" at which we are now seeking a seat.
  - 1. Current conditions require us to be *purposeful* in preparing ourselves and one another to make an *apology*.
    - a) It is needed for all, but especially regarding our youth:
      - (1) Don't short-change or talk down to them. The internet and media spread multiple ideas widely; many of our youth have explored widely may view an inability to answer as proof we have no answers.
      - (2) But, we need to be ahead of them in our awareness, giving them at least the framework for what we know they will face because we've studied it.<sup>8</sup>
    - b) We will benefit from pointing people to a basic approach that is streamlined. It is hard, if not impossible, to be an expert in all the areas of study involved. It is better to master a basic apologetic patterned after the approach generally taken in the New Testament.
    - c) At the same time, we will benefit from "body" participation (Eph. 4:11-16), using as resources those who are experts in particular areas.
  - 2. 2 Timothy 3:17 applies to this, too: Scripture equips us "for every good work"!

### III. We should learn from what they did.

- A. For this overview, we will limit our study to three principles from Paul's sermon in Athens.
  - 1. He saw their idolatry as an opportunity, not a threat; they were, after all, "very religious" (Acts 17:22); he began with the common ground he shared with his hearers (compare Acts 13:16-41 and 17:22-34).<sup>9</sup>
  - 2. He believed it was profitable to reason with the people in the "marketplace" of ideas.
    - a) Notice that the appeal Christians made to the Greco-Roman world was a *reasoned* one (v. 17; cf. Paul's "custom" in vv. 2-4).
    - b) He did not hesitate to share his teaching in the marketplace of ideas, not just in the synagogues that shared his basic worldview and Scriptures.
  - 3. He did not allow himself to be diverted from the fundamental message of Jesus and the need to turn to God through him (see esp. 17:17-18, 31).

## Conclusion

1. Applying the evidence regarding the use of the “witness” word group in the New Testament to the current missionary situation, Allison Trites wrote, “All of this material is suggestive for twentieth century apologists. The person and place of Jesus in the present pluralistic theological climate is still very much a contentious issue. The claims of Christ as the Son of God are currently widely disputed. In such an environment a brief must be presented, arguments advanced, and defending witnesses brought forward, if the Christian case is to given a proper hearing. *To fail to present the evidence for the Christian position would be tantamount to conceding defeat to its opponents*” (my emphasis).<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Randy Harris did a class series at the 2009 Pepperdine lectures: “My Favorite Atheists: Conversing with the Enemy.” He emphatically urged that we go to the trouble to read opposing views before “answering” them.

<sup>2</sup> Not all have questions of proof and consistency, but many do. Also, some who do may never vocalize them in a church setting, but will think about their questions if they are introduced and acknowledged by a teacher or mentor.

<sup>3</sup> See John H. Westerhoff, III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1976); Third Revised Edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Relative to the question of owned or inherited faith, consider the following:

John Clayton once told this in chapel at Abilene Christian University: “A little boy was asked by a minister why he believed in God. He replied, ‘I guess it’s been in our family for a long time.’ Unfortunately, that answer is the reason many of us hold to the religious convictions that we have. We really do not know why we believe what we believe; we have simply accepted the traditions of our childhood and are following that acceptance through life. I, too, accepted the traditions of my childhood; but, unlike many people, my belief system was one of atheism...” — John N. Clayton, “Appendix,” in J. D. Thomas, ed. *Evolution and Faith* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988), 201.

Related to this is a question a teacher of mine once asked us: “If you had been born in India or Iran, what religion would you be?”

We can frame the question this way: Are you a Christian because of informed conviction or osmosis?

<sup>5</sup> The writings of Justin Martyr, including his *First* and *Second Apologies* and his *Dialogue with Trypho*, another apologetic writing, are available online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/justin.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this idea and the resistance Christians faced generally, see Larry H. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> The point can be expanded: among the other things they do, nearly every writing — and certainly every section — of the New Testament defends the faith against some counter-view or distortion. Some defend against more than one thing, or defend specific points. See e.g., the Gospels in light of the purpose statements found in Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31. Also see places where what they wrote amounted to a defense against an attack on the faith, as in Matthew 28:11-15 where Matthew answers the charge that the empty tomb was to be explained by the claim that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body.

<sup>8</sup> Framework, or philosophy, is more important than a catechetical approach that called for rote memorization of this answer to that question. If we can teach the broader principles well, perceptive students can draw from them to answer specific challenges that present themselves as new to their circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> This reminds me of a story another teacher of mine told about a believer on a plane who found himself seated next to an atheist. When the latter found out the man was a believer, he said, “I don’t believe in God.” The man wisely responded, “Tell me about the god you don’t believe in; I may not believe in him either.”

<sup>10</sup> Lothar Coenen and Allison A. Trites, “Witness,” in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 1048. Trites wrote the last section of this article (pp. 1047-1050) on “the value of the witness-theme for the church in the last third of the twentieth century” (1047). If anything, his assessment is even more apt in the second decade of the twenty-first century.