



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Christ-Centered Defense

“I wonder at the hardihood with which such persons undertake to talk about God. In a treatise addressed to infidels they begin with a chapter proving the existence of God from the works of Nature . . . *It is a remarkable fact that no canonical writer has ever used Nature to prove God.*” ~ Pascal, *Pensées*, IV, 242, 243; in C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962), 13; my emphasis.

I don’t remember if Pascal’s statement influenced me, but do recall that around the time I was first reading Lewis in the early 1980s it occurred to me that, for the purpose of equipping church members to defend the faith, narrowing the field of study from the multiple subjects included in a typical Christian Evidences course might be more practical.

Scripture, which equips for every good work (2 Tim 3.17), says that the first disciples made their case by persuading people that Jesus is Lord and Christ (cf. Acts 2.22-36; 17.1-4, 16-31). So it is reasonable to prepare to present a Christ-centered apologetic.

A few years later, I read this concise statement of the idea:

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We Should Offer the World An Apology

David Anguish

Most who see the word “apology” will think of admitting an error or expressing regret. Both ideas are included in the first definition in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. But a secondary meaning says an apology is “something that is said or written to defend something that other people criticize: defense.”¹

Since it is the basic meaning of the Greek word *apologia* (ἀπολογία), from which the English “apology” comes, I’m using the second meaning here. An *apologia* was a defense, reasoned statement, or argument. It meant to reply or answer, whether in court or to justify an idea or behavior more generally. New Testament writers used it to refer to someone speaking in his own defense (Acts 19.33; 25.16; 1 Cor 9.3; 2 Tim 4.16) and to Christians engaged in defending their belief, either the truth of the events undergirding the faith or the components of its teaching (Phil 1.7, 16; 1 Pet 3.15; also Acts 22.3; 25.8; 26.1-2).

Paul’s use of *apologia* in Philippians 1.7 in a paragraph about his regular prayer of thanksgiving for that church is of particular interest. Declaring his gratitude for their partnership (κοινωνία; *koinōnia*) with him in the gospel (vv. 3-5), he said they were partners (συγκοινωνός; *sugkoinōnos*) “both in my imprisonment and in the defense (*apologia*) and confirmation (βεβαίωσις; *bebaiōsis*) of the gospel.”

“Confirmation” meant “to cause something to be known as certain—‘to confirm, to verify, to prove to be true and certain, confirmation, verification.’”² It conveyed reliability and dependability, the confidence associated with swearing an oath or offering a guarantee. Its use with *apologia* in Philippians 1.7 indicates that Paul did not view a defense of the gospel as merely the expression of a passionate conviction.

"[C]onsider all the other things we can settle once we know that Jesus is God and that his words are God's words. We then have an authoritative answer to all our most important questions: Is there a personal God who loves us? What is our duty in life? How do we become children of God? Why did Jesus die? Is there life after death?" ~ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Zondervan, 1992), 154.

For an excellent introduction to (or review of) the case, see James T. South, *Just Jesus: The Evidence of History* (DeWard Publishing Company, 2012; 152 pp.).

Thinking: Lifeline to God

"Thought is important because it is not just subjective, not just a process inside our heads, but it allows us to live in reality, in truth. Thought contacts truth, however, fitfully. It opens our inner eyes to the light. God is truth, God is light, God is ultimate reality. Therefore thought is a lifeline to God. That is its ultimate importance."

~ Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Servant Books, 1986), 29.

Scripture Above All

"Dry rehearsal of biblical facts is a poor approach to Christian nurture, but it represents only a problem of pedagogical deficiency. The solution is more thoughtful and creative teaching. When Scripture is replaced, however, by an alternative subject matter (whether deliberately or unwittingly), the enterprise ceases to be *Christian* nurture at all, regardless of how 'meaningful' or 'relevant' the curriculum might be." ~ Douglas L. Gragg, "What Do These Stones Mean?" *Passing on the Faith in Biblical Perspective*, *Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 13.

It included teaching that was grounded in reality and subject to examination.

Other New Testament passages using a form of βέβαιος (*bebaios*) support this conclusion, referring, for example, to a guaranteed promise (Rom 4.16); an unshaken hope (2 Cor 1.7); a reliable message, either from angels or human witnesses (Heb 2.2-3); confidence like a sure anchor (Heb 3.14; 6.19); the confirmation of the testimony of Christ (1 Cor 1.6); or being established by God in Christ and the faith (2 Cor 1.21; Col 2.7).

Since it is God's power for salvation (Rom 1.16), some have maintained that the gospel does not need to be defended, only proclaimed.³ But the New Testament's use of *bebaios* and *apologia* shows that the earliest disciples intended to confirm and defend what they proclaimed.

Yes, we do need more than arguments alone to influence others to believe, as Peter noted when he said that defending (*apologia*) should be done "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3.15). Proclamation can be compromised by obvious moral inconsistency and/or bitter harangues. But surely we see that in a world of competing ideas and loyalties, we must make a genuine effort to explain why we believe as we do and are trying to persuade others to do the same (cf. Acts 17.4; 18.4, 13; 19.8, 26; 26.28; 2 Cor 5.11).

In other words, if we hope to meet our world as they did theirs, we should offer it an apology.

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Notes

¹ "apology." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> (3 September 2019).

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d, Accordance electronic ed., version 4.2 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

³ For a reply to this claim, see William Dyrness, *Christian Apologetics in a World Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 19.

For years, I kept the following reminder of preaching's purpose on a note card under the plastic cover of my desk pad.

"Preaching the gospel is not delivering edifying discourses, beautifully put together. It is bearing witness to what God has done in Christ for man's salvation."

~ Leon Morris, "The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians," Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Eerdmans, 1975 printing), 51

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