



THE BEREHA PAGE

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

Centered on the Message

"It may be part of our task as Christian witnesses today to inculcate a new awareness of the authority of the Scriptures as God's Word written, and a new awareness of the power of God to work in the world which he created." ~ F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1977), 17

"Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow [Hebrews xiii. 8]) in the particular language of our own age. The bad preacher does exactly the opposite: he takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out in the traditional language of Christianity." ~ C. S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Eerdmans, 1970), 93

"So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me."

~ Colossians 1.28-29; NLT

New Testament Apologetics

David Anguish

The passage most often cited to stress the importance of apologetics, the reasoned defense of the faith, is 1 Peter 3.15.¹ As he equipped his readers to cope with persecution, Peter commanded them to "have no fear, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (vv. 14b, 15; ESV).

It is significant that honoring Christ the Lord as holy is the main action called for in verse 15. In fact, "honor as holy," the ESV's translation of the plural imperative form of *hagiazō* (ἀγιάζω), is the only imperative verb in the verse. We learn from other passages that multiple things are necessary to completely fulfill that command, but in this verse, the way to observe it is by "always being ready" (NASB; a better translation of the plural form of the adjective *hetoimos* [ἔτοιμος]) to make a defense (*apologia* [ἀπολογία]) to anyone who asks for an explanation of the Christian hope. In other words, without apologetics, undertaken purposefully and "with gentleness and respect," we have not fulfilled our calling to "honor Christ the Lord as holy."

Although the way the terms are used now would indicate otherwise, "Christian evidences" is not a synonym for, but rather one concern of "apologetics," a reality demonstrated by the New Testament writers. In Acts, for example, believers responded to challenges from groups that included: [1] both Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews (Acts 2, 3-5, 6-7); [2] a subset of believers who questioned Peter for daring to accept Gentiles into the church (11.1-18); [3] the related challenge from believers who tried to make commands of Moses' law prerequisites for salvation (15.1-21); [4] polytheistic pagans who worshiped idols (Acts 14, 18-19); and [5] philosophers who questioned everything (Acts 17.16-31).

On Certainty & Mystery for Those Who Suffer

“Some of us have absorbed a form of theology with all the answers. We can offer standard answers to every problem that comes along, especially if the problem is afflicting some other person. Our certainty and dogmatism give us such assurance, our systematic theology is so well articulated, that we have precious little scope for mystery, awe, unknowns. . . .

“It becomes important, then, to decide just where the mysteries and the certainties are. Christianity that is nothing but certainties quickly becomes haughty and arrogant, rigid and unbending. Worse, it leaves the Christian open to the most excruciating doubt when the vicissitudes of life finally knock out the supporting pillars. The God of such Christianity is just not big enough to be trusted when you are up to your neck in the muck of pain and defeat. Conversely, Christianity that is nothing but mystery leaves nothing to proclaim, and makes faith indistinguishable from blind credulity. . . .” ~ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Baker Books, 1990), 27

An Inverted, Diminished View of Reality

“If old Protagoras was right that ‘man is the measure of all things,’ then beliefs make truths. But what tiny truths they would be—no bigger than a mortal’s meandering mind.” ~ Douglas Groothuis, *Philosophy in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic* (IVP Academic, 2016), 144

The rest of the New Testament also shows evidence of a defense of the faith against a variety of challenges. For example, John wrote to convince people to come to (or be strengthened in their) belief in Jesus (John 20.30-31).² Matthew answered the charge that Jesus’ tomb was empty because the disciples had stolen his body (Matt 28.11-15). Galatians is Paul’s defense of justification by faith against Judaizing teachers. In Colossians, he responded to a syncretistic doctrine that challenged the supremacy of Christ. In his epistles, John responded to believers who had gone out from the church and were anti-Christ, denying that he had come in the flesh (cf. 1 John 2.18-19; 4.2; 2 John 7). Jude defended “the faith that was once for all delivered” (Jude 3) against antinomianism. Revelation equipped believers to respond to the growing influence of the emperor cult.³

There are many things to learn from studying the New Testament’s apologetic emphasis. Foremost among them is that they considered such an endeavor worth the time of their preparation and engagement. It is no less needed today.

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Notes

¹ First Peter 3.15 is not the only New Testament text to feature the word and the practice of *apologia*. See my brief treatment of the word’s meaning and a list of relevant texts in “We Should Offer the World An Apology,” *Berea Page* 1, 2 (Nov. 11, 2019).

² Manuscript variants present two possibilities for the form of the verb “believe” in John 20.31. One suggests an evangelistic aim; the other a strengthening purpose. Both ideas are evident in John. For a summary of the arguments and relevant sources, see my paper, “The Purpose of John: A Preliminary Study,” posted on my [website](#).

³ For a useful discussion of the apologetic emphasis throughout the New Testament, see F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977).

An Older Book, Worth the Time

In anticipation of writing the above article and others that will build on it, I re-read F. F. Bruce’s *Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (see above), a book I bought over 40 years ago (cover price: \$2.95!).

The back cover says, “Bruce has written a study remarkable for its clarity and genuine insight into familiar New Testament passages.” He also “points to ways in which the defense should be conducted today,” for “the ultimate purpose of *apologia* is to commend Jesus Christ as Saviour to the world.”

I concur, and recommend that if you have—or can lay your hands on—a copy, you invest a few hours to explore Bruce’s rich and thorough insights (small paperback, just over 100 pages). ~ *David*

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