

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS ON APOLOGETICS¹

INTRODUCTION:

"It is one mark of the truth of our holy religion that it courts (solicits) enquiry. Christianity lays open its claim to every one that asks a reason of the hope which it inspires, and declines no species of a fair investigation.² ...The defense of the faith belongs to the preaching of the gospel. Preaching without apologetics is scarcely preaching at all. It encourages naked credulity and shallow conviction. Christian and non-Christian alike demand to know, and have a RIGHT to know, that the historical and intellectual foundations beneath the gospel are sound. In Isaiah 41:21, the Lord issues a ringing challenge to the false gods: 'SET FORTH YOUR CASE, says the Lord; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob' ...'Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear' (I Pet. 3:15). **All Christians stand beneath this command, but many are disobedient to it.** The earliest believers called men to an intelligent faith. They pressed boldly the claims of Jesus Christ as they had been dramatically verified in history by the fact of the resurrection. Upon the validity of this historical datum rested and continues to rest the truth of the Christian message...

"The shape of our defense is to some extent molded by the intellectual climate of our times. The apologist needs to be wise in his generation, and play the matter by ear. For there is no normative approach to Christian apologetics. Our aim requires a continual refocusing simply because our target moves ceaselessly. We have a responsibility to reach our generation... **The Christian gospel pleases both heart and head. It is a rational and intelligent faith.**" (pp. 7-9)

THE DEFINITION & PURPOSE OF APOLOGETICS:

"Christian apologetics is concerned with a defense of the truthfulness of the Christian religion. **The task of theology is to define the content of revealed truth, while the task of apologetics is to defend its validity.** Theology and apologetics are twin members of a common family. In our spiritual warfare, the one is defensive, the other offensive. The aim of apologetics is not to trick a person into becoming a Christian against his will. It strives rather at laying the evidence for the Christian gospel before men in an intelligent fashion so that they can make a meaningful commitment under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. **The heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false.** Apologetics presents compelling reasons to the mind for receiving Christ as Saviour into the total man. Faith is based upon credible evidence which people can recognize as trustworthy in accord with proper criteria for truth...

"The Greek word apologia from which we derive apologetics occurs some eight times in the New Testament.³ It signifies a defense of conduct and procedure. Several times the apostle Paul was called upon in a court of law to defend his right to preach the gospel in public (Acts 22:1; II Tim. 4:16). Festus made the sense clear when he told King Agrippa of his conviction that an accused prisoner deserves the right to make his **defense** in the presence of his accusers and in a court of law (Acts 25:16). The apologia Peter commands us to render (I Pet.

¹ All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from "*Set Forth Your Case - Studies in Christian Apologetics*," by Clark H. Pinnock. Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1971. When I first read this book 35 years ago, it helped me greatly. However in the ensuing decades, Pinnock's theological position on a various issues dramatically departed from a conservative, biblical position. I would not recommend any recent writings by him. However these particular comments regarding apologetics which were made over 30 years ago, are very good. -Mike Edwards, January, 2011.

² Daniel Wilson, *The Evidences of Christianity* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1829), p. 25, cited by Pinnock, p. 7).

³ "APOLOGIA... a verbal defence, a speech in defence, is sometimes translated 'answer,' in the A.V., Acts 25:16; I Cor. 9:3; 2 Tim. 4:16, all which the R.V. corrects to 'defence.' See Acts 22:1; Phil. 1:7,16; 2 Cor. 7:11, 'clearing.' Once it signifies an 'answer,' I Pet. 3:15. cf. B, No.4... (verb) APOLOGEOMAI... lit. to talk oneself off from (apo, from, lego, to speak) to answer by way of making a defence for oneself (besides its meaning to excuse, Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 12:19), is translated 'answer' in Luke 12:11; 21:14; in Acts 19:33, A.V. and R.V. both have 'made defence;' in Acts 24:10; 25:8; 26:1,2, the R.V. has the verb to make a defence, for the A.V. to answer, and in 26:24 for the A.V., 'spoke for himself.'" (W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Fleming H. Revell Company: Old Tappan, NJ, 1966 ed., p. 61)

3:15) is not primarily in the face of police inquiry; the verb 'ask' rather suggests an informal question such as 'Why are you a Christian?' To such a query every believer is obliged to be ready with a sensible answer... The aim of apologetics is to demonstrate the validity of the Christian system and defend it against attack...

TWO ENEMIES OF APOLOGETICS:

(A) "RATIONALISM [i.e. Liberalism] has never left much room for supernatural revelation and miraculous incarnation, and finds apologetics beneath its dignity. If the Christian faith consists merely of intuitive truths and ethical codes, to defend the case for supernatural Christianity is rather beside the point...

(B) "MYSTICISM [i.e. determining truth by feelings] on the other hand, with its delight in the empty irrationalism of the heart disdains apologetics as impertinent and unnecessary... Faith in Christ becomes an arbitrary act grounded in nothing...

"Christian commitment does not take place in a vacuum. **What modern unbelief needs is not less apologetics but more. Faith is not the opposite of knowledge.** The scandal of the gospel is not its alleged immunity from proof. The gospel makes sense, not non-sense. Its offense lies in its moral unmasking of the sinner, not in its supposed uncertain truthfulness. The mind is not to be left at the threshold in Christianity. Such deliberate irrationalism is positively anti-Christian and plays directly into the hands of unbelievers who cherish the illusion that the gospel is a foolish leap of faith. 'The greater the risk, the greater the faith' is one of the most damaging fallacies ever to afflict the mind of Christian people. It leaves men secure in their false world views, and denies them access to the public evidences which make the gospel unique. Modern theology has rejected 'magic' for 'myth' and modern man will believe neither. **The hour has struck for a virile apologetic which will challenge the naive confidence of humanism and display the beauty of the Christian system. We will never win a victory if we decline to enter the conflict.** The current apologetic strategy of retreating from all positions under attack may avoid bloodshed, but can result only in abject surrender and total defeat.

"Ironically enough, a definite species of irrationalism also appears in branches of Protestant orthodoxy. Because of an unbiblical appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart, an unholy alliance of skeptics and Christians together disparages the solid defenses of the gospel. As if the faith which the Spirit commends to the heart must be an irrational faith! Is it not almost blasphemous, these Christians ask, to seek to make the gospel acceptable to the natural man? Can debate and argument ever really convert anyone? ...This confusion arises through a failure to distinguish the inner from the outer testimony in the gospel. A Christian preacher or witness brings the data of Christ and His work to a person. Theology and apologetics join hands in performing this essential role in evangelism. However, apart from the work of the Spirit, the gospel will fall on deaf ears. The problem lies in the inability of the natural man (I Cor. 2:14), not the veracity of the gospel (II Cor. 4:3-4)...

THE ROLE OF APOLOGETICS IN EVANGELISM:

"In salvation the Spirit creates the **capacity** for receiving God's truth, but TRUTH it is. **In producing a photograph, light must fall upon the film, and the film must be processed to yield an impression. Both light and development are essential to a photograph. In precisely the same way the Spirit and evidences are essential to saving faith.** To cite a telling phrase from B.B. Warfield:

'One might as well say that photography is independent of light, because no light can make an impression unless the plate is prepared to receive it. The Holy Spirit does not work a blind, ungrounded faith in the heart. What is supplied by his creative energy in working faith is not a ready-made faith, rooted in nothing, and clinging without reason to its object; nor yet new grounds of belief in the object present; but just a new ability of the heart to respond to the grounds of faith, sufficient in themselves, already present to the understanding. We believe in Christ because it is rational to believe in Him, not though it be irrational. For

the birth of faith in the soul, it is just as essential [emphasis added] that grounds of faith should be present to the mind as that the Giver of faith should act creatively upon the heart.⁴

"Certainly the Bible teaches that the sinner is deaf, blind and dead to the claims of the gospel. But this does not absolve us of the responsibility to present truth which can save under the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek. 37:1-14). What saves is the Spirit acting upon the data to bring about saving faith...

A POTENTIAL DANGER OF APOLOGETICS:

"At the same time there is no place for arrogance and pride. Even the soundest apologetic has no power to make a man a Christian, or coerce a sinner to repent. The Spirit alone has the task of conviction to perform (Jn. 16:8-9). But the conviction the Spirit engenders is itself grounded in evidence... There is, however, no room for confidence in the flesh. The natural man has a deep-set bias against the gospel (Rom. 8:8). All our pleading and argument will do nothing to budge him from his usurped throne of self-worship. The gospel must be 'caught' as well as 'taught.' **Even where the soundest evidence conceivable is present to the mind, and faith follows (as with Peter in Mt. 16:16), it is no credit to human intelligence.** 'For flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father' (v.17). We are instruments in the Spirit's grasp. Without His skill no lasting results ensue. Yet, paradoxically, without the preacher and apologist the Spirit is silent (Rom. 10:14-17)...

"A sound grasp of Christian apologetics is an indispensable tool for evangelism. From philosopher to peasant the same questions are asked which differ only in the degree of sophistication. An intelligent Christian ought to be able to point up the flaws in a nonchristian position and to present facts and arguments which tell in favor of the gospel...

APOLOGETICS: NEEDED TODAY MORE THAN EVER!

"The need for apologetics has become more urgent with the rise of a monolithic secularism. It is a vanishing sector of people who can still be approached with proof texts and historic Christian terminology. As the gap between the gospel and our culture widens, the bridges have to be longer and stronger. Apologetics deals in the area of PRE-evangelism. A twenty-minute sermon with three illustrations and a tearful invitation is simply insufficient grounds for requesting an intelligent decision for Christ... Apologetics is related to worship too. It is always a joyous discovery to see afresh the adequacy and firmness of God's truth. Christian worship is far removed from the dark cathedrals, flickering candles, and mystical experiences. It arises in the soul fixed in adoration and contemplation of God's truth. Intelligibility is of the essence. The feeling that results from a tiring spiritual conflict in witness for Christ is not exultation in the flesh, but renewed amazement at the beauty of the good news!" (all above quotes from pp. 11-18).

Finally, it must always be kept in mind that ultimately no matter how attractive and sincere a presentation of the gospel is given, or how clear & cogent a defense of the Christian faith is given to an unbeliever, there is a natural "offense of the cross." It cannot be avoided and it must not be "papered over" or minimized. F.F. Bruce stated it well: "the crucial 'scandal'⁵ of the Christian faith, its central offense (is that) Christianity will not come to terms with other religions, nor will it relax its exclusive claims so as to countenance or accommodate them. It presents itself, as it did in the first century, as God's final word to man; it proclaims Christ, as it did in the first century, to be the one Mediator between God and man."

⁴ B.B. Warfield in F.R. Beattie, *Apologetics* (Richmond, Va: Presb. Com. of Publ., 1903), p. 25, cited in Pinnock, pp. 15-16).

⁵ Bruce adds: "'Scandal' is here used in the sense of Gk. *Skandalon*, 'stumbling-block': the 'scandal of particularity' is the Christian claim that the climax of God's saving revelation is tied to a particular time, a particular place and (above all) a particular person."