

## **A Survey and Introduction to Christian Apologetics**

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### **Introduction**

*Apologetics* is an undertaking that has been with the Christian church from the very beginning. One scarcely reads the Bible before they encounter an apologetics scenario. The Lord Jesus and His apostles were consistently faced with situations that demanded some form of defense as well as setting up a position on a matter. The Book of Acts, for instance, outlines several events repeatedly portraying some kind of apologetics as the apostles referred to scripture, historical events or indeed facts that had been observed by people then living. Apologetics then is an important feature of the Christian Church and ought to be recognized as such.

### **Nature and Brief Description Apologetics**

Apologetics, as earlier intimated, has to do with the establishing or defending the Christian faith. Derived from the word, "apologia" which denotes a defense of a position one takes. Plato even wrote a book carrying a title to that effect and from that time, apologetics has been attributed to a defense rather than being apologetic or sorry for a stance taken. To do the work of apologetics, a person so engaged in it does several things including marshaling logical arguments for or against a position, having a reasonable basic premise as well as confirming what one holds, in the light of possible opposing views.

### **Types of Apologetics**

Apologetics is of various types. It may be said to be positive and negative in nature. Positive apologetics establishes and confirms a position taken and seeks to convince or persuade others to its position as being the best option. Further, it aims at stating the facts about a position so that others have a clear view and correct knowledge of a given stance. Usually, positive apologetics is not combative but reasons with or argues for a position. Negative apologetics on the other hand is a defense of a given position equally using arguments but tends to refute, argue against as well as demolish other positions in preference for the stance one has. By that token, it tends to be combative and confrontational in some instances where need be. In summary, it spots short comings in opposing

views, exploits them in a combative assault so that in the process, ones, view and premise is viewed as the more reasonable, preferred and probably the best in given circumstances. Negative apologetics entails serious research, digging and understanding of an opponent's position and views with an aim to puncture their arguments. Furthermore, it is important to state that apologetics can be approached from different angles or perspectives, exploiting different arguments or tools to either argue a preferred position or simply establish a position. Though many schools of thought exist in relation to approaches, two prominently stand out, with respective potent pundits on either side. The Evidential approach insists on adducing tangible evidence to argue for or prove a given theistic position rather than accepting arguments by faith. In short, evidentialism demands empirical evidence of some sort before a fact can be established. By that token, this approach is in sync with the modern way of thinking. An example of an evidentialist is the famed Charles Hodge of the Old Princeton Theological seminary. The second is the presuppositional apologetics heralded and championed by the venerable Cornelius Van Til, late Professor at the Westminster Theological seminary. Another strong presuppositionalist would be the late EJ Young whose monumental book *Thy word is truth* published by the Banner of Truth Trust is a good read on the nature and extent of revelation or inspiration. In between these positions however, is a whole range of schools of thought advanced by the likes of Ronald Nash, BB Warfield, Behe, Thomas Aquinas, Hugh Ross, William Dembski, and Henry Morris among many other worthies of the past and present. All these assert that their respective positions are intelligible, reasonable, God Honoring and effective tools for evangelism to the glory of God. There are other people who engage in apologetics from other positions and motives to establish their point, either from a theistic premise or not.

### **Why Christian apologetics?**

Christian apologetics is that aspect of apologetics falling under positive apologetics that seeks to establish, present and confirm the reasonableness of the Christian faith. Christians of different sorts, engage in some form of apologetics although many of them may not be aware. For instance, when one is presenting the gospel as the way to life, the Christian marshals all sorts of arguments to both confirm and argue a case so that a person may believe the Biblical Christ. The said Christian may exploit evidences from nature, the scriptures, historical or even archaeological arguments to further a case. Others insist that the scriptures are sufficient to enlighten someone rather than use external evidences outside the Biblical meta-narratives. As can be observed, Christians differ in their approaches aiming for the same outcome. It may interest the reader that even in each respective school, views differ in relation to the nature and extent of what may be called the "*evidential*" or "*presuppositional*" school. In the evidential school, we have the likes of Hodge and Warfield who were serious Biblists and yet appealed to other evidences to cement his

argument. Within the same school, we have people like Hugh Ross that argue for a kind theistic evolution of sorts (although he claims to in fact oppose theistic evolution!), in addition to what the Bible says. He claims that the scriptures are not correctly interpreted historically but must be viewed in the light of what science and other evidences have established or confirmed. For instance, Hugh Ross believes in an Old Earth created over vast periods of time (although ironically opposing theistic evolution!) while others like Drs. Henry Morris and John Whitcomb argue for a Young earth created (In *The Genesis Flood*) over a literal 24 hour six day period. Each of these appeals to some sort of evidence but what differs is the nature and type. It may be concluded therefore that Christian apologetics is about positively establishing the Christian faith using reasonable arguments.

## **History of Christian Apologetics**

With the advent of and publication of Darwin's origin of species in 1859, Christian apologetics came to the fore. To claim that Christian apologetics started in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century would however not be true because apologetics had been going on for many centuries before that and continues today. What changes is *how* it is done, the content and issues of the time. Right from the Apostles days, God enabled them to prove the fact and truthfulness of the Christian message by appealing to what people had witnessed or seen. This tended to resonate and stick with them. Examples of arguments would include the resurrection, the appearances of Jesus and the miraculous events wrought by the apostles. Then came the Apostolic fathers (such as Polycarp) followed by the Church fathers and the apologists such as Justin Martyr, Saint Ignatius and others. Later we observe people contending for theological or other positions in Athanasius, Saint Augustin, Anslem, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Akempis, Savonarola, John Calvin, The Puritans, and Jonathan Edwards before we reach the famed Benjamin B Warfield and Charles Hodge in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Later apologists would include Alvin Plantinga, Behe, John Frame, Ronald Nash, Ken Blanchard, Norman Geisler, Voddie Bochum (expository), C.S Lewis, Bahnsen, Logan Nyasulu and William Craig among others. It appears that the stream has grown broader as the years have gone by, and as things have become more complex in nature. Modernism had its own unique challenges for sure, but post modernism posits other dynamics such as relativism, pluralism, and syncretism. While not out rightly denying the existence of a supreme being governing affairs of men, post modernism is fertile ground for syncretism, ecumenism and tolerance for all positions (although inherently detesting absolutes and therefore Christian dogmas etc.) to flourish. Nothing can be said to be right or wrong but depends on one's perspective and world view. It is into this slippery context that the apologist must now operate to the glory of God.

## **What Others Have Said/Written About Christian Apologetics**

As one pours over the works of apologists, past and present, one cannot help but notice that God has raised people from all walks of life to advance the cause of Christ in various ways. Although for a while, the Christian church somewhat loathed and looked at philosophy and apologetics with some kind of disdain and suspicion, the times demand that this attitude changes, given that the scriptures demonstrate that apologetics has been part of the church all along. While it is held, and rightly so, that salvation belongs to God alone, heralds of the gospel must exploit about every God-glorifying argument in the book to draw in myriads into the kingdom of God. Writers such as Geisler, Craig and Ronald Nash have written extensively on the necessity of Christian apologetics. Although they may differ in approach or method of presentation, they tend to seek to glorify God from a clear Biblical mandate as they see best.

### **Key Lessons Gleaned from This Consideration**

1. Different approaches of apologetics have been exploited with varying degrees of success including the following methods:
  - Evidential- an example of an evidentialist is the famed BB Warfield
  - Presuppositional- The clear champion of this approach has been Cornelius Van Til
  - Intelligent design – This has been championed by Dr Behe and is a relatively newer approach to apologetics, tackling areas such as Genetics, DNA among other complex areas, and yet proving the existence of an intelligent God.
  - Thomistic-This approach was by Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century
  - Augustinian- Saint Augustine had an interesting approach to apologetics, given his rich and diverse back ground before and after conversion. He engaged in different types of apologetics both positive and negative.
2. All the approaches listed above have their merits and demerits depending on how one approaches their apologetic.
3. Different people, as demonstrated above have headed different movements. In recent years, there have been varying views about the age of the Earth championed by Dr Henry Morris (recent creation); Hugh Ross (old Earth) and William Dembski (Intelligent design).

4. It is interesting to note that those that support an old earth view like Hugh Ross ironically oppose theistic evolution or is it that they subtly advocate for it?
5. The Intelligent designer argument draws supporters from both the Young or Old Earth creationists.
6. The Intelligent design movement leans more on the Old Earth creationism rather than the Young earth creationism because of its open ended view in respect to the creation time line.
7. Different ages may be stated for apologetics over the ages (in addition to the point 1 above). We may classify these as follows:
  - Classical age: Tertullian, Ignatius etc.
  - Medieval age: Thomas Aquinas, Augustine etc.
  - Reformation age: Calvin, etc.
  - Post reformation and modern age: CS Lewis, BB Warfield etc.
8. The *Heathen* question is a big one, with pundits on either side. Christians are divided over this matter as well. Questions such as: Can the heathen be saved without having heard the gospel? What about the 'pagan saints' of the OT, how were they saved?
9. There are several positions that people take: the inclusivist or exclusivist positions. The inclusivists are somewhat accommodating while the exclusivists appear closed in asserting that unless some one hears and responds to the gospel, they cannot be saved.
10. Does God relate differently to people before and after the gospel? This and other questions demand clear answers.
11. The inclusivist claims the unevangelised will be saved regardless whether they hear the gospel or not, respond to the call or not because the light in them & their response is what matters. Faith in Jesus is not essential. The exclusivist on the other hand (in two camps; Covenant and dispensational) holds that salvation is by grace through faith, without which no one shall be saved. Faith in Jesus is a must to be saved or else be damned. The Old Testament (OT) saints looked to a future saviour while the New Testament (NT) saints look on the cross. Special revelation is essential to salvation and people must express faith in Jesus now to be saved. The OT saints expressed faith in Jesus "in some way" and thus were saved.

From the foregoing, it is evident that mastering the historical roots of apologetics requires constant reading to appraise oneself on the nature of the faith in an apologetic perspective.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that Christian Apologetics is relevant today and needs to be encouraged. Despite the advances that have been recorded in recent years, there is still need for more apologists who seek to glorify Christ through reason as they establish the Christian faith. The Church desperately needs to come out of its shell and interface the world with the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16-17)

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