

What Is Apologetics?

Four Probe staffers answer the question, “What is apologetics?” from their own experience and understanding.

Apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith, generally speaking. That’s the definition of the word. But, that’s about the extent of the agreement among Christian apologists. From this point on begin many differences.

Many well informed Christians define apologetics differently. When it comes to *how* we defend the faith, there is a lot of discussion on the best method. When it comes to *why* we do apologetics many disagree. Thoughtful Christians do not agree on the best place from which to begin defending our historic Christian faith, and we certainly don’t all agree on who apologetics is for, that is, who is the intended recipient or beneficiary of our defense of Christianity.



However, as we begin a discussion on these questions, it is important to keep in mind these differences occur among faithful Christians, sincere believers, and are well intended. So these differences are not a salvation issue—that’s about faith in Christ. Airing out these differences then, is a fulfillment of Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” It is our hope and expectation as the writers therefore, that all Christians will be edified by this discussion whether they have walked with Christ for thirty years or thirty days.

In this article, we’re going to hear from several Probe staffers answering the question, “What is apologetics?”

So, you Probe fans are going to get to know us Probe staff better. First-time readers, I hope you consider a perspective you may not have considered before. And for all of us, I hope that by considering these different perspectives, we all grow

in the way we defend our faith, and carry out the charge from 1 Peter 3:15. That's the passage of Scripture from which we derive our English word "apologetics." It says, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

Regardless of how we define apologetics, we are all still called to defend our faith. The point of this discussion is not the discussion itself. The point is to equip us by the Spirit in the action of defending our faith, as we obey the call of our one common Lord Jesus Christ.



Dr. Ray Bohlin

In this article you will become well-acquainted with the idea that apologetics basically means defending the gospel or defending the faith. That is how I have always understood apologetics. But in my nearly forty years with Probe Ministries I understand that my "defense" goes in two directions and I believe that to be the case for every believer.

Apologetics was instrumental in my initial profession of faith while a college student at the University of Illinois. Though I was raised in a religious home, it was primarily a religion of duty and performance. But in my second year of college I became aware that there was real evidence that the gospels could be trusted and that Jesus was a real person who lived and died in early first century Israel. That made a huge difference in my willingness to consider Jesus that was never there before.

That was just over forty years ago, and evidences for the truth of the history of the Bible have always held a unique place in my thinking. As one trained as a scientist, I learned

that data or evidence meant everything. Ideas are fine in science but if you can't support your ideas with evidence, you're wasting your time. Therefore, finding real evidence for my faith put my own thoughts on solid ground. So it can be for every believer. We all struggle with trust in God and in His love for us. But if we are able to see that God fulfills prophecy, that His Word is trustworthy in every respect, then we find it easier to trust Him with our lives.

The other direction for my defense of the faith is outward to other believers who have real questions and find themselves stuck in their walk with God. Their mind is full of doubts about God, Creation, and redemption. While I make it clear that I cannot prove that God exists, I can string together evidences from science and philosophy to demonstrate that belief in God as Creator is quite reasonable. And if the best evidence demonstrates that Jesus physically and historically rose from the dead, then everything He said can be trusted as well.

This also applies to unbelievers who come with honest questions. Those outside the church have many reasons for not believing that this rather fantastic story is true. Especially when it all happened two thousand years ago! There are definitely some unbelievers who ask their questions only to avoid getting down to business about Jesus. But initially, we can't judge a person's heart or motive. When we take those questions and doubts seriously and respond with gentleness and respect, both our manner and our answers can be used by the Spirit to draw someone to the Father.



Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese

Apologetics is the most misunderstood word in the Church today! Average church-goers relegate it to a side category of their minds as a hobby horse for those "smart" Christians who

are too cerebral and not practical enough. Apologetics appears to them as the playground of theologians, far removed from the lay Christian who thinks the true gospel ministry consists of "just preaching the Word" irrespective of the Church's cultural setting.

Theologians contribute to the popular aversion to apologetics through misrepresenting the discipline as a branch of theology that seeks to give a rational justification to the claims of Christianity that is theoretical in nature as opposed to practical. Others separate apologetics entirely from theology: "If theology is the queen of the sciences, apologetics is her handmaid." This is the Rationalist approach.

All theology is apologetics. The term *apologetic theology* distinguishes it from the Rationalist approach. It stresses the relevance of the gospel to the philosophical needs of a given culture, creating a synthesis. One definition states that "systematic theology is 'answering theology.' It must answer the questions implied in the general human condition and special historical situation. Apologetics, therefore, is an omnipresent element and not a special section of systematic theology." Apologetic theology supplies answers from revelation to the ultimate questions of a given social context, such as "What is the meaning of life?"

Apologetic theology maintains the integrity of the two poles of message and audience. It must never compromise the essential meaning of the gospel, nor can it neglect the spiritual needs of the society it wishes to reach through ignoring or ridiculing whatever ultimate questions it presents.

All theology is apologetics, and by extension all that the Church does is apologetically oriented. The adaptation of contemporary music in the worship service demonstrates an apologetic theology that takes the traditional message of the gospel of Jesus Christ and makes it resonant with the cultural

needs of the younger generation. The same may be said with the use of film or any artistic, religious or philosophical expression. For example the 2013 Superman movie *Man of Steel* retells the story of Christ in modern allegory in the context of American individualism. It asks the question, can individuals practice personal freedom and exercise the self-restraint necessary for a democratic society to survive? Revelation answers that in Christ personal freedom is rooted in the love of God that provides necessary restraint.

As its task, apologetic theology answers the world's questions with the Bible and proves practical and accessible to all Christians, trained in theology or not. It stresses the Bible's universal relevance to every individual, group and circumstance or philosophical system.



Rick Wade

In 1 Peter 3:15 we're told to "give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for your faith." The roots of Peter's exhortation can be found in Isaiah 8 where God warns His people to stand firm when the enemy attacks, and in Luke 12 and 21 where Jesus tells His disciples what to do when persecutions come. In both passages in Luke, Jesus uses the word that is translated "defense" in Peter's epistle. In Luke 21:13 he says something interesting: "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." I see two main exhortations here: faithfulness and witness. Elaborate arguments and evidences can serve that. But defense ought to be conducted for the purpose of proclaiming Christ and winning the lost, not merely to prove Christianity true. That is too low a target.

Apologetics with non-Christians can include the defense of Christian doctrines, challenges to other beliefs, and persuasion. To be done well, these require knowledge of at

least basic Christian doctrines and the ability to discriminate between the true and the false. That skill can be applied in a variety of areas such as theology, philosophy, history, culture, and the broader human experience.

If we should attempt to persuade someone by making a case for the faith, where do we begin? In one respect, we should begin with questions that are being asked rather than with our own pet arguments. But in another respect, we should begin as Christians, thinking and speaking within the context of Christian beliefs, rather than attempting to stand on some neutral ground with unbelievers to look at evidences together.

One mistake younger apologists can make is deciding to find some non-Christians and “do apologetics” with them. This is to focus on the arguments and not on the listeners. Apologetics provides tools for Christians to use along with the tools of proper Bible interpretation, counseling, practical hands-on help, and other things as needed in the context of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus and drawing people to Him.

Apologetics serves not only non-Christians but Christians by clarifying the differences between Christian and non-Christian beliefs and by showing why our beliefs are intellectually credible. This should serve to strengthen our faith.



Paul Rutherford

When I tell someone I meet at church that I’m into apologetics, the most common response, I get is, “Huh?” After I tell them what it means, perhaps the next most common response is, “What are you sorry for?”, inferring from the similar sound of the word “apology” that I must be apologizing for something.

While the root word in Greek is the same for both words—*apologia*. these words in English have rather different

meanings. So, I will begin my turn at defining apologetics by clarifying what it is not.

Apologetics is not being sorry for Christianity. Let's make that clear right now. I am not sorry I'm a Christian. On the contrary, Christ is the source of all my boasting. He is the source of my joy in my life. It is Christ who gives me purpose, meaning, even significance. No, apologetics is not being sorry for Christianity.

Years ago I had lunch with a friend one Sunday after church and explained to him what I do—apologetics. After using 1 Peter 3:15 to define it as making a defense for the faith, he responded by saying our faith should not be defensive, but offensive. My friend got one thing right—our faith does have an offensive component.

But, my friend also got one thing wrong. The command to defend our faith does not describe the entirety of our experience as a believer. This passage does not mean that our faith should be entirely defensive, or even primarily defensive. We should, however, have the capacity to defend our faith.

To conclude my definition and this series, I will share a recent change in my perspective over the years. When I first began studying apologetics years ago, I did it to seek affirmation of my convictions. To be honest, I studied not to “show myself approved” (2 Timothy 2:15), but rather to satisfy a sense of self-righteousness. I did apologetics in order to show others I was right and they were wrong. Scripture calls that pride. And, although that's no longer my primary motivation, the struggle remains today.

It's not that I no longer think I'm right. I do think the positions I hold are right, but as an apologist my goals have changed. I no longer expect others to take the same positions I do. Now, I desire others to think more biblically than they did before.

My hope for you reading this article is that your reasons for defending the faith are motivated more by Christ than by culture, and that by considering what it means to defend your faith you are now a more confident ambassador for Christ.

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First Dallas Series “How Can I Know?”: Links to Apologetics Articles



We are pleased and honored to suggest these articles and answers to email as helpful additions to Dr. Robert Jeffress' 2012 apologetics series at First Baptist Church Dallas (Texas).

Aug. 26	How Can I Know How To Start Over When I've Blown It?
	<u>Grappling with Guilt</u> <u>“Will God Punish Me Forever for My Mistakes?”</u> <u>“Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?”</u> <u>The Sinfulness of Humanity</u>
Sept. 2	How Can I Know How To Forgive Someone Who Has Hurt Me?

	<u>Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You</u> <u>The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 2</u> <u>“How Do I Overcome My Hurts and</u> <u>Disappointments From My Church?”</u>
Sept. 9 & 16	How Can I Know There Is a God?
	<u>Evidence for God’s Existence</u> <u>There is a God</u> <u>Does God Exist?</u> <u>Answering the New Atheists</u> <u>No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic</u> <u>of a Critic</u>
Sept. 23 & 30	How Can I Know The Bible Is True?
	<u>Are the Biblical Documents Reliable?</u> <u>The Historical Reliability of the</u> <u>Gospels</u> <u>Authority of the Bible</u> <u>Bart Ehrman’s Complaint</u> <u>The Christian Canon</u>
Oct. 7	How Can I Know God Is Good With All The Suffering in the World?
	<u>The Problem of Evil</u> <u>“I Doubt the Existence of a Good God</u> <u>Who Allows a Baby to Suffer and Die”</u> <u>Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem</u> <u>of Evil</u> <u>Hope For a World Gone Bad</u> <u>The Value of Suffering</u>
Oct. 14 & 21	How Can I Know Christianity Is The Right Religion?

	<u>Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions</u> <u>Is Jesus the Only Savior?</u> <u>Christianity and Religious Pluralism</u> <u>"How Can I Teach Pluralism Wisely?"</u> <u>Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism</u>
Oct. 28 & Nov. 4	How Can I Know I'm Going To Heaven When I Die?
	<u>"How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?"</u> <u>Dealing with Doubt</u> <u>"Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?"</u> <u>"Can a True Believer Commit the Unforgiveable Sin?"</u>

Defending Your Faith – Additional Readings

Defending Your Faith – *Additional Readings for Probe's course on basic apologetics*

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- The Christian Mind: www.probe.org/the-christian-mind
- Hindrances of the Mind: www.probe.org/hindrances-of-the-mind-the-scandal-of-evangelical-thinking
- Faith and Reason: www.probe.org/faith-and-reason

Issue 2 – Apologetics & Evangelism

- The Apologetics of Jesus: www.probe.org/the-apologetics-of-jesus
- The Apologetics of Peter: www.probe.org/the-apologetics-of-peter
- The Relevance of Christianity: www.probe.org/the-relevance-of-christianity-an-apologetical
- What Constitutes Good Proof? (Ronald Nash) [Access article by clicking here.](#)

Issue 3 – Worldviews

- Why Worldviews: www.probe.org/why-worldview
- Worldviews Part 2: www.probe.org/worldviews-part-2
- Worldviews Through History: www.probe.org/worldviews-through-history
- How Do You Spell Truth? www.probe.org/how-do-you-spell-truth
- Truth: What Is It & Why We Can Know It: www.probe.org/truth-what-it-is-and-why-we-can-know-it

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Tactics for an Ambassador: Defending the Christian Faith

Most Christians equate evangelism with conflict: an all-out assault on the beliefs and values of others. In our relativistic, live-and-let-live culture, even the most

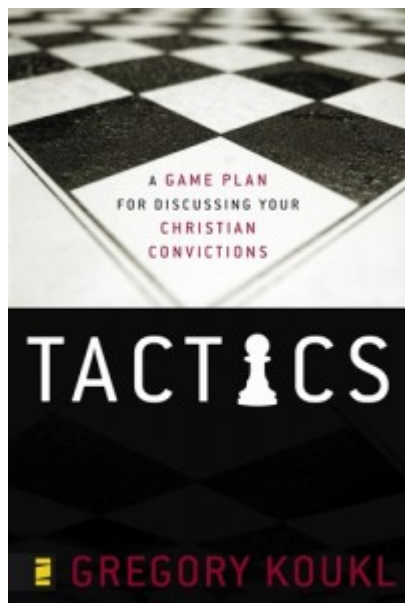
motivated believer feels like he's committing a crime by entering into a spiritual discussion. Are there ways to take the anxiety out of evangelism?

The idea of doing Christian apologetics, a fancy word for defending the Christian faith, has lost some luster among church goers. The word conjures up images of conflict, anxiety, and even anger. But most of all, it generates thoughts of inadequacy and lack of confidence among those called to "give an answer" (1 Pet. 3:15) for the hope we have in Christ. Most people are trying to avoid conflict and the emotional fatigue that comes with defending a controversial set of beliefs that are often ridiculed in our culture.

We live in an era that values diversity and tolerance above all other virtues. Anyone claiming to have true knowledge about important things like the nature of God, good and evil, or the purpose of human existence will be accused of intolerance and a mean spirited attempt to impose their beliefs on their neighbors. You are allowed to believe almost anything today, as long as you don't claim that it is true in any universal sense.



Part of the reason that Christians in American churches do so little evangelism is that they are convinced that it constitutes a spiritual invasion, an attack on the beliefs of a friend or neighbor who will resist this apologetic assault with everything he or she has to offer. They also believe that they will have failed miserably unless every encounter ends with someone trusting in Christ. It's either total victory or utter defeat, and there are no innocent bystanders.



Gregory Koukl's book *Tactics* helps to give Christians the right perspective on evangelism and apologetics.^[1] He argues that the D-day invasion model for evangelism is counterproductive, and that seeing oneself as an ambassador for Christ makes more sense. We need fewer frontal assaults and more embassy meetings. The skills necessary to be a successful ambassador are quite different from those of an infantryman. Persuasion rather than conquest motivate the ambassador, and

one's style of communication can be as important as the content being conveyed.

According to Koukl, an effective ambassador for Christ must master three skill-sets. First, a Christian ambassador should possess a clear understanding of the message being offered by his sovereign King. Second, he needs to exhibit a personal character that reinforces the message he's been charged with, not distract from it. Finally, an ambassador needs sufficient wisdom to know how to communicate his message in a manner that draws people into dialogue and then to keep the conversation going. This kind of wisdom translates into specific tactics for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture that has been preconditioned against the message.

Why Do We Need Tactics?

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says that we are Christ's ambassadors and that God has entrusted us with a message of reconciliation to a lost world (2 Cor. 5:20). But, although we have good news to share, Christians often don't feel capable or confident to share it.

Being tactical has to do with the way one arranges his or her resources. The effective tactician knows when to be aggressive

and when to hold back and gather information. Commanders on a battlefield don't unleash every weapon available at the beginning of a conflict, nor do ambassadors immediately unveil all of their arguments.

Apologists know that one of their most important tactics is the well placed question. Picking up important personal information about someone's background and worldview provides critical insight into the best way to steer the conversation. The ability to ask good questions, combined with good listening skills, helps to avoid stereotyping people in ways that can cause the conversation to end suddenly. It also shows that you care about someone as an individual, not just as, for example, a Mormon or a Muslim. Even when someone labels oneself, let's say as a Hindu, it's important to discover what that term means to them. Hinduism contains a wide variety of possible beliefs and it would be counterproductive to argue against something that this person doesn't adhere to. As you can imagine, being a good listener and shaping your comments to fit the individual will most likely have a greater impact on them than just memorizing a tract and delivering it regardless of the setting.

Employing wise tactics implies a thoughtful rather than emotional approach to conversations. Emotions can quickly get the best of us, especially if we are unprepared to respond to the questions and challenges that we may encounter. Good planning helps us to accomplish our goal of guiding people to the truth about Jesus. It can also help us to avoid provoking someone to anger. Once people get angry they rarely hear our defense of the gospel. It's even worse if we get angry.

Some might respond to this call for wise tactics in sharing Christ by saying that you cannot argue someone into heaven. I would respond that you cannot love someone into heaven either. Neither arguments, or love, or a simple telling of the gospel alone will win someone to heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can change someone's heart, but it doesn't follow that God doesn't

use these methods to build His kingdom.

Becoming Sherlock Holmes

Sometimes we Christians are tempted to dump our entire theological systems on anyone willing stay put long enough to listen. This doctrinal dump might be a light load for some but a train load for others. The problem is that we are often trying to answer questions that people haven't even thought up yet and we can add confusion and distractions to the gospel message without even being aware of it. How can we avoid making this mistake?

When we sense that a conversation is headed toward spiritual territory, perhaps our first inclination should be to ask good questions so that we better understand the person we desire to share Christ with. Good questions protect us from jumping to conclusions and to deal with the actual beliefs a person holds rather than some straw man position that we might prefer to attack. They also have the tendency to naturally promote further dialogue and shape the discussion.

Once a person makes a statement regarding what they believe to be true, good questions can be particularly helpful. If someone tells you that it is irrational to believe in God because there is no proof that He exists, you now have an opportunity to ask key questions that will make your eventual responses far more effective. The first category of questions seeks further information and clarification. For instance, you might ask "What do you mean by God?" or "What evidence would you count as proof towards His existence?" You might ask if he knows anyone who believes in God and whether or not they might have good reasons for doing so. Asking someone how they arrived at a conclusion or how they know something to be the case helps to differentiate between simple assertions of belief and reasons for holding that belief. People often make statements of belief without much forethought, and when

challenged they find that they have little more than an emotional attachment to their view.

Don't panic if you run into someone who is prepared to defend his or her views. Even if they have an extensive argument supporting their position, good questions can get you out of the hot seat and provide time to build a stronger case for your next encounter. You might ask them to slow down and present their case in detail so that you can understand it better. You can also tell them that you want time to consider their position and will get back to them with a response. Giving someone the podium to clearly present their beliefs is usually well received. Listen carefully to what is said and then do your homework.

Suicidal Arguments

One of the more interesting parts of *Tactics* are Koukl's chapters on ideas that commit suicide. These are commonly called self-refuting ideas or ideas that defeat themselves. A fancier description is that they are self-referentially incoherent. It doesn't take long to encounter one of these arguments when talking to people about religion.

A simple example of a suicidal view is expressed by the comment, "There is no truth," or the more humble version, "It is impossible to know something that is true for everyone, everywhere." This statement fails its own criteria for validity by denying universal truth claims and then making a truth claim implied to be universal. If what the statement professes is true, then it is false. It commits suicide because it violates the law of non-contradiction which prohibits something from being both true and false at the same time.

Christians who are highly influenced by a postmodern view of truth often make self-defeating arguments as well. Koukl gives

the example of a teacher in a Christian college classroom asking her students if they are God. When no hands went up she proclaimed that since they are not God they only have access to truth with a small t; only God knows Truth with a capital T. The implication is that small t truth is personal and limited. A student might ask the teacher if what she just offered is truth with a small t; if so, why should the students accept the teacher's limited personal view of reality over the student's perceptions?

Another argument that's quite popular and self-defeating is, "People should never impose their values on someone else." A quick response might be, "Does that express your values?" Of course it does. Then ask the person why he is imposing his values on you. His statement violates the criteria of validity that it tries to establish.

Even comments that seem to make sense at first suffer from suicidal tendencies. For instance, some have argued that since men wrote the Bible, and given that people are imperfect, the Bible is flawed and not inspired by God. The problem is that although people are imperfect it does not follow that everything they say or write is flawed. In fact, if everything a human says or writes is flawed, then this comment about the Bible is flawed. Just because people are capable of error, it doesn't mean that they will always commit error.

Helping people to see that their truth claims might be contradictory must be done gently. The point is not to merely defeat their position, but to help them to become open to other ways of thinking about an issue. It is in this context of gentle persuasion that the Holy Spirit can change a heart.

Sharpening Your Skills

The list of self-defeating truth claims can get rather long. For instance, it is common to hear people say something like

“science is the only source for truth.” The problem with this statement is that it is not scientific. There are no scientific experiments that one can perform which establish that science is the only source of truth. It is a self-defeating statement.

It is also quite popular to assume that all religions are basically the same and equally true. If this is the case, then Christianity is true. However, a basic teaching of Christianity is that the core teachings of other religions are false and that Jesus is the only source of salvation. Again, the statement defeats itself.

Ideas that commit practical suicide include the notion that it's wrong to ever condemn someone, and that God doesn't take sides. The first comment is a condemnation of all who condemn others. The second assumes that God is on their side, even though God doesn't take sides. If you think through these ideas you can be ready to gently point out their self-contradictory nature and move on to subjects more profitable.

When dealing with difficult ethical issues like abortion or homosexuality, it is always helpful to have a preplanned set of tactics. Koukl gives the example of a Christian who is asked his views about homosexuality by a lesbian boss. He begins his response by asking if the boss is tolerant of diverse points of view. Does she respect convictions different from her own? Of course, true tolerance means putting up with someone you disagree with. Since very few people want to label themselves as intolerant, they will usually affirm their support of the practice, protecting you from being attacked for giving your viewpoint.

Gregory Koukl's book contains many more great ideas about responding to attacks on Christian belief. At the end of the book he leaves us with what he calls the ambassador's creed. An ambassador should be ready to represent Christ. He should be patient with those who disagree. He should be reasonable in

his defense. And, finally, he should be tactical, adapting his approach to each unique person that God brings into his path. Our wise use of tactics should improve the “acoustics” in a conversation so that people can hear the gospel well.

Note

1. Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

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