

The Apologetics of Peter – A Logical Argument for the Deity of Christ

Steve Cable explains how the apostle Peter showed himself to be a master apologist, not the bumbling, brash fisherman he used to be.

Peter – A Leader in Apologetics

How many times have you heard the Apostle Peter portrayed as the brash fisherman whose mouth was always several steps ahead of his brain? According to many sermons, Peter's life motto may have been "Open mouth, insert foot!" Certainly Peter did not hesitate to speak his mind which sometimes landed him in trouble and sometimes resulted in commendation (Matthew 16:23; Matthew 16:17). I suspect we often focus on Peter's foibles because we feel that if Jesus could love and use Peter then perhaps there is hope for us as well. Others have been known to say, "I guess I take after Peter" as an excuse for thoughtless words or actions which dishonor Christ.



However, if we look at Peter's entire life journey as recorded in Scripture, we see a life that set an incredible example of love, zeal, compassion, courage and *effective apologetics*. Wait a minute! Peter, a leader in apologetics? That field is only for egghead theologians, not an uneducated fisherman like Peter, right?

Yes, absolutely Peter was a leader in this area. Here are several reasons why we can be sure that Peter was a leading apologist for Christianity.

1. Peter recognized the evidence pointing to Jesus as the Christ early on. When others doubted Jesus' teaching, Peter declared, "To whom shall we go, you (Jesus) have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). As an eyewitness of Jesus' teaching, signs and miracles, Peter, through the Father's revelation of His Son, went on to declare, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16).

2. Beginning at Pentecost, Peter took on the role as the primary spokesperson presenting a reasoned argument for the gospel before the Jewish masses, the Jewish authorities and the first Gentile converts.

3. It appears that Peter was the one Paul approached to discuss his theology and arguments for the gospel before Paul began sharing them with the entire Roman world (Galatians 1:18). In his second epistle, Peter equates the letters of Paul with the "rest of Scripture," giving them his approval as "God breathed" (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1:20-21).

4. Peter is the one that commanded us to be prepared to give an effective, reasoned argument for our faith, introducing the term "apologetics" to our vocabulary as important for every believer as he told the believers in Asia, "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" (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Peter was never shy about taking the lead. If we are to obey this command to be prepared with a reasoned defense, it behooves us to look at the example and teaching of Peter.

In this article, we will examine the apologetics of Peter to help us grow in our ability to give a reasoned defense. Peter was following the example and instruction of his Teacher, Jesus.^{1} (For a detailed discussion on Jesus' example, check out "The Apologetics of Jesus" probe.org/apologetics-of-jesus and other resources at probe.org.)

Peter's Defense – Credible Witnesses for the Gospel

Peter commands each of us to be prepared to give an effective reasoned argument for our hope in Christ. Is it possible that this uneducated fisherman was a master at this craft? Let's begin our examination of how Peter went about making an argument for the gospel.

I have been greatly blessed by studying Peter's sermons and testimony in Acts and his letters to the churches in Asia. From that study, we find that Peter focused on five aspects in his comprehensive defense of the gospel:

1. Credible witnesses
2. Compelling evidence
3. Confronting objections with consistent reasoning
4. Changed lives
5. Clear conclusion

Let's look at each of these aspects in turn to see what we can learn to make us better at giving a reasonable explanation for our faith in Christ.

First, Peter based his argument on the basis of credible witnesses. He pointed his audience to four primary witnesses:

1. The eyewitnesses to Jesus' life
2. The audience's own personal knowledge of Jesus
3. The testimony of Scripture
4. The Holy Spirit

Peter and the other apostles were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. Speaking to a crowd in the temple shortly after Pentecost, he said, "[Jesus' resurrection is] a fact to which we are witnesses" (Acts 3:15). In Caesarea, he told the Gentile Cornelius, "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in

Jerusalem" (Acts 10:34-48). Much later, writing to the believers in Asia, Peter explains, "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16-17). Multiple eyewitness accounts of an event provide credibility, so Peter points to "we," not just "me," in each occasion.

Peter also called upon the experience of his listeners. In his sermon at Pentecost, he points to the signs Jesus did stating, "just as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22). In other words, your own experience supports what I am telling you about Jesus.

Peter uses the Scriptures as an important expert witness. In Acts, Peter refers to the witness of the Scriptures nine different times, explaining how the scriptural prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus. He told his listeners, "But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18).

Addressing a Jewish audience, Peter did not have to defend the credibility or accuracy of the Scriptures as you may be compelled to do today. But when he addressed the church in Asia, he wrote, "So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). He pointed out that his eyewitness experience with Jesus gives him even greater confidence in the Scriptures.

Finally Peter highlighted the critical testimony of the Holy Spirit in explaining the miracle of Pentecost and in front of the Jewish leaders. As he told those leaders, "And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32).

At this point, you may be thinking, "I don't have the

advantages Peter had. I am not an eyewitness, the person I am sharing was not around when Jesus was performing signs and miracles, and they also think the Bible is full of myths. I am zero for three when it comes to pointing to credible witnesses." You may be right, but the principles still apply to us today. Even though you are not an eyewitness, you possess written testimony from eyewitnesses who would not change their testimony even under the threat of death. The Gospels and the letters of Peter and John are eyewitness accounts. And, you are an eyewitness of what faith in Jesus has meant in your own life.

I have a friend who is a retired teacher and volunteer hospital chaplain. A number of years ago, his late wife was in the hospital recovering from a severe internal infection which nearly took her life. When the attending physician came by her room to arrange for her release, she thanked him for her recovery. The physician replied, "Don't thank me. Thank God." She responded, "How am I supposed to thank God? I don't even believe in God." The physician said, "To find the answer to that question, I would like to give you a prescription. When you get home, read the first three chapters of the Gospel of John."

When she got home, she was surprised to discover that John was located in the middle of the Bible. She told her husband, "This is strange; shouldn't I start with Genesis?" But you see, this physician had been asked to give a defense for the hope that was in him and he began by pointing her to an eyewitness. Shortly, after reading these chapters in John, she placed her faith in Christ. Her husband told me that he personally knows of at least thirty people who are now Christians because this physician said, "Don't thank me. Thank God," and introduced her to the eyewitness John.

We can also point out that no one refuted Peter when he told this large crowd that they were well aware that God had performed many miraculous signs through Jesus, and the Jewish

authorities did not refute it either. We can also call upon the listeners' own experience with life. They were not around to see Jesus perform miracles, but they did have experience with the futility of sin and the struggle with hopelessness.

In our defense of the gospel, we can point out that there is universal agreement that all of these prophecies fulfilled by Jesus were written hundreds of years before Jesus' life. The fact that Jesus fulfilled those prophecies lends credence to both the Scriptures and to Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.[\[2\]](#)

Peter's Defense – Compelling Evidence for the Gospel

Of course, credible witnesses are not sufficient to make a convincing argument. If the evidence they report is circumstantial or inconclusive the argument is undermined. The testimony of Honest Abe Lincoln would not be very helpful if all he had to say was, "It was dark and I couldn't really see what happened." Peter made his argument by honing in on the following compelling evidence for the gospel:

1. Jesus did not live an ordinary life. God attested to Jesus' special position "with miracles and wonders and signs."
2. Jesus suffered a highly public death by crucifixion.
3. God raised Him up again.

First, the signs Jesus performed lend credence to the possibility of the resurrection. As Peter wrote to the Christians in Asia, "For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased' – and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:17-18).

I have the opportunity to share the gospel with international students who have little prior knowledge about Jesus and Christianity. As we look together at the accounts of Jesus' miracles, I ask them, "What would your response be if you witnessed these events? What would you think about Jesus?" Usually the response is, "I would want to find out more about him. How is he able to do these things? He is not a normal person."

The second piece of evidence is essential to the argument. If Jesus did not actually die on the cross, His resurrection is a farce. In every defense, Peter states that we know that Jesus was put to death on a cross (Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39; 1 Peter 1:3; 3:18). Jesus' crucifixion resulted in real physical death. Jesus did not escape death; he experienced death to pay for our sins. The Jewish leaders did not try to refute Peter's assertion that Jesus had died on that cross.

The crowning piece of evidence is that "God raised Jesus from the dead" (Acts 3:15). Peter wants his audience to know that this is an indisputable fact. Peter told Cornelius and his household, "[we] ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead" (Acts 10:41).

Jesus' resurrection is the heart of the gospel and of any defense of the gospel. Consequently, it is the central theme of Peter's message.[{3}](#)

Peter's Defense – Confronting Objections with Consistent Reasoning

Some Christian speakers suggest that being "fools for Christ" (1 Corinthians 4:10) means that we do not need to address objections with logical arguments. This is odd since the person they are quoting, Paul, based his ministry and his letters on giving a rational argument for the Christian faith. Perhaps even more compelling is that the uneducated fisherman, Peter, also confronted objections using logical reasoning. He

knew that a good argument addresses both the evidence clearly supporting the conclusion and also any evidence which appears to counter the conclusion.

Let's look at three specific objections on the minds of his listeners that Peter addressed in Acts and his letters.

The first objection he addressed is the popular notion that the Messiah would come in triumph and in power; certainly not in suffering and death. In his arguments, Peter reminds the listeners that the prophets clearly state that the one who will bring healing and restoration will suffer (Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:11; 1 Pet. 1:10-11; 2:21-24). He told the crowd in the temple, "God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer" (Acts 3:18). He pointed the rulers and the elders to Psalm 118 when he declared, "[Jesus is] the stone which was rejected by you the builders, but which became the chief corner stone" (Acts 4:11).

The second objection is that the Scriptures do not teach the resurrection of the dead. The Jews were looking for a descendant of David who would reign forever as the Messiah. Peter used Psalms written by David to show that the God had revealed that the Messiah would die but not be abandoned to Hades or suffer decay and be raised to sit at the right hand of God (Psalm 16:8-11; 132:11; 110:1).

Later in his life, Peter took on a new objection which was not an issue in his early defense. This third objection was that Jesus had not returned to the earth as He promised. Peter knew that some scoffers were saying, "Why should we believe that Jesus is going to return? It has been years since His death and the world just keeps going along just as it always has." Peter responds by

1. identifying the false assumption in the scoffers' argument,

2. providing an important perspective on the question, and
3. explaining the rationale for delaying Jesus' return.

The false assumption is that God has not dramatically intervened in the past. Peter reminds them that God destroyed human civilization through the flood and the scoffers of that time did not believe God would act against them either.

The important perspective is that God does not view time in the way humans do. "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The rationale is God's mercy as Peter wrote: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Although you may need to address one of these three specific topics at sometime, the important point is that Peter did not gloss over the objections. He did not just say, "I am an eyewitness. Jesus is the resurrected Messiah. Repent and believe." He addressed the concerns he knew were on the minds of his audience with consistent rational arguments.

Peter's Defense – The Testimony of Changed Lives

Peter knew that an effective argument for the gospel, for our hope, needs to include visible as well as oral arguments. Peter emphasized current evidence that his audience could experience or observe at that time.

For example, at Pentecost his sermon is in response to the crowd drawn to the spectacle of the disciples praising God in many different languages. He points out that this event is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel. Then the body of his message leads to the point that "[Jesus] has poured forth this

which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

Similarly, in the temple he points to the healing of the lame man as evidence that Jesus is the resurrected Prince of Life (Acts 3:15-16).

In his first letter to the churches in Asia, Peter explains that our purpose as God’s special people is to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). One way we fulfill our purpose is by always being ready to give a reasoned argument for our faith. However, Peter teaches us that it is much more than a verbal or written argument. According to the body his letter, we proclaim Jesus’ excellencies by

1. our excellent behavior,
2. our loving relationships,
3. our response to suffering,
4. our servant’s heart, and
5. our devotion to prayer.

These living arguments are essential elements supporting any effective argument explaining our living hope in Jesus. Peter put it this way: “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; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame (1 Peter 3:15-16). A good conscience and good behavior are directly tied to the effectiveness of our defense. Peter also highlights the importance of presenting our argument with gentleness and a genuine concern and respect for the other person as someone created in the image of God and loved by Jesus.

Peter’s Defense – A Clear Conclusion

Sometimes we get so enthused about the argument that we forget

the purpose. We always want to point people to the fact that they can receive a living hope through faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Peter always kept his conclusion in mind. Let's look at how he presented the conclusion.

To the crowd at Pentecost, he said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified. . . Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:36-39).

To the crowd in the temple, he said, "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away" (Acts 3:19).

To the Jewish leaders, he proclaimed, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

To Cornelius and his household, he concluded, "through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43).

To the church in Asia, he reminded, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

Peter wanted them to understand the importance of Jesus life, death, and resurrection to their eternal future. His clear conclusions invited a response from each individual.

Our examination of the preaching and teaching of Peter has shown him to be a master apologist for the gospel. If we want to follow in his footsteps, we study his example preparing ourselves to give an effective argument consisting of

1. credible witnesses

2. compelling evidence
3. confronting objections with consistent reasoning
4. changed lives, and a
5. clear conclusion.

Then when people say that you are acting like Peter, it should be a testimony to your effective witness for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on Jesus' example, check out Pat Zukeran's "The Apologetics of Jesus," (probe.org/apologetics-of-jesus) and other resources at probe.org.
2. For more resources explaining our confidence in the Bible as a reliable witness, check out Pat Zukeran's "Authority of the Bible" (probe.org/authority-of-the-bible) and other resources by going to probe.org/radio.
3. To find out more information on the compelling evidence for the Resurrection and its importance in making a reasoned argument for the gospel, see Steve Cable's, "The Answer is the Resurrection" (probe.org/answer-is-the-resurrection) and other resources available at probe.org/radio.

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