

# Six Reasons Why Apologetics Do Not Undermine the Call to Faith

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**M**ore than once I have been approached by Christians who are suspicious of my attempts to equip believers in the area of apologetics. Christian apologetics is the rational defense of the Christian faith which for some Christians is problematic in and of itself. They ask, “If as Christians we are called to faith, aren’t we in some way skirting that faith if we look to defend Christianity by invoking human reasoning?” Considering Christianity’s heavy emphasis on faith, this question deserves a good response. In fact, if this concern is not addressed up front, it is likely that even the most ardent efforts to see believers employ apologetics will fall short. Accordingly, in this brief article I offer six reasons why apologetics don’t undermine faith.

## 1. WE CAN’T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS SAYING TO US WITHOUT USING OUR MINDS

The church has long recognized that Scripture represents the handiwork of human authors, but more importantly it is the revelation of God through those authors. By this Christians mean no less than that the Bible is literally God’s word to humanity; it is what he wants us to know of him and his ways. Few have considered, however, what must be true of humans if they are to understand what it is that God has spoken. Simply put, people must have the mental capacity to comprehend what God is trying to communicate. This does not eliminate the need for God to illumine the mind so we can fully grasp what he says, but the point here is that God is illuminating our human reasoning faculties, he is not illuminating our feet or our hands.

When considering the revelation of God, it is particularly valuable to recognize the emphasis God has placed on the *written* Word. While it is true that some have come to know certain things of God through other means (such as visions, angelic appearances, or the personal testimony of others), Scripture is insistent that revelation through any other source be tested by the objective standard of the written Word of God.<sup>1</sup> This testing, by its very nature, requires an ability to comprehend language, the recognition of any contextual considerations that might impact a proper interpretation of the text, and the skill to compare and contrast the written Word with any other claimed sources of truth. In other words, it requires use of the mind.

Most Christians are unable to read Scripture in its original languages and must rely upon those who have intellectually engaged the text in order to translate it

accurately so that readers from many backgrounds may understand it. Of course, the language skills necessary to produce such a translation require years of intense academic study before they can be of benefit. Consider, for example, Martin Luther, a professor at the University of Wittenberg, who came to discover the gospel during his academic preparation for lectures on the book of Romans. His later translation of the Bible (designed to make the Scriptures accessible to the common person) would not have been possible without academic training and years of intellectual engagement with the Scriptures. Furthermore, his translation was dependent upon the work of Erasmus (who earlier had painstakingly prepared an authoritative edition of the Greek New Testament) and on his colleague, Melanchthon.<sup>2</sup> It is not too much to conclude then that the Protestant Reformation and its “salvation through faith alone” message would not have gained support apart from the well-reasoned and intellectual engagement of men like Luther and his colleagues.

## 2. GOD SPECIFICALLY CALLS US TO ENGAGE THE MIND SO THAT WE MIGHT KNOW HIM

The rise of the postmodern worldview in the last half-century has brought with it an increasing skepticism regarding knowledge. Knowledge, some purport, is merely a social construction that has been manipulated by those in power, and does not represent anything that is unchanging or objectively true. Scripture, on the other hand, refutes the postmodern view and is adamant that it is possible for humanity to know things and particularly to know things about God.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Numbers 16:28-30, we read:

Then Moses said, “This is how *you will know* that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. If these men die a natural death, or if they share the fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD does something entirely new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up along with all that they have, and they go down alive to the grave, then *you will know* that these men have despised the LORD!”<sup>4</sup>

What one should note from passages like the one above<sup>5</sup> is that they do not give the impression that knowledge of God and his ways is something that comes through extra-mental supernatural implantation. Instead they suggest that knowledge is attained in concert with an intellect that

gathers information and processes it, in this case in regards to the judgment of God.

Yes, both Reformed and Arminian thinkers agree that spiritual birth comes by faith and not through the process of reason, but this does not mean that faith discourages sound reasoning or that sound reasoning is not a necessary precursor for faith. The Bible gives every sense that those who are saved are normatively saved after having intellectually understood something about God, namely that righteousness comes by faith in the merciful work of God in Christ. One frankly cannot come to faith without having faith in something, and that “something” requires mental apprehension. The late Princeton theologian, J. Gresham Machen, concurs:

No conversion is ever wrought simply by argument... but because intellectual labor is insufficient it does not follow, as is so often assumed, that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes He does. But He does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connection with certain conditions of the human mind.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. GOD COMMANDS US TO LOVE HIM WITH OUR MINDS

God invites us to reason with him<sup>7</sup> and to seek after wisdom and understanding regardless of the cost.<sup>8</sup> This is not because use of human reason itself is cause for divine approval, but because such effort puts us in a position to better love God. One might even say that the call to engage our minds exists because as those made in the image of God it is doubtful we can love God as he has commanded apart from reason. John Piper addresses this very concern:

The main reason that thinking and loving are connected is that we cannot love God without knowing God; and the way we know God is by the Spirit-enabled use of our minds. So to “love God with all your mind” means engaging all your powers of thought to know God as fully as possible in order to treasure him for all he is worth.

God is not honored by groundless love. In fact, there is no such thing. If we do not know anything about God, there is nothing in our mind to awaken love. If love does not come from knowing God, there is no point calling it love for God. There may be some vague attraction in our heart or some unfocused gratitude in our soul, but if they do not arise from knowing God, they are not love for God.<sup>9</sup>

As Piper suggests, while thinking and reasoning are not the goals of humanity, they are an indispensable means to arriving at a knowledge of God that allows for the greatest

love of him. It is not surprising then that God calls teachers to study his word diligently and teach its truth accurately,<sup>10</sup> and calls the church to give a rational defense of the faith.<sup>11</sup> Nor is it surprising that Jesus, in summing up the teaching of the Law in a single command, said, “Love the Lord your God” and to do so “with all your mind.”<sup>12</sup> For Jesus, utilizing thinking and reasoning skills was not optional, reserved only for those with intellectual gifts; it was and is an imperative if we are to love God properly.

### 4. JESUS DID NOT SHY AWAY FROM SOUND REASONING IN HIS OWN PREACHING

Jesus was a champion of faith, often trumpeting the faith of others<sup>13</sup> and chastising those who did not exhibit faith.<sup>14</sup> But his encouragement of faith was not in opposition to use of the mind. Quite the contrary. Frequently, Jesus purposely engaged the mind to bring about faith. For example, Jesus did not call people to believe in his identity as the Messiah just because he said so. In John 5:31 he says, “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true.” He then goes on to state a number of sources that bore witness to his claim as the Messiah, namely John the Baptist;<sup>15</sup> the works, or miracles, which God have given him to do;<sup>16</sup> God’s own words;<sup>17</sup> the Old Testament Scriptures;<sup>18</sup> existential knowledge tied to obedience;<sup>19</sup> the Holy Spirit; and eventually the testimony of the disciples.<sup>20</sup> Jesus provided this evidence not because he needed to justify himself, but because he recognized that if others were to be expected to believe they would need good reasons for believing.

Apart from providing evidence for his identity, we also see Jesus employ strong reasoning skills on several occasions in order to substantiate his teaching. Jesus was particularly drawn to *a fortiori* arguments.<sup>21</sup> For example, when Jesus seeks to support his claim that God will answer those who seek him, he presents the following argument:

Is there anyone among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, although you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!<sup>22</sup>

When Jesus presents this argument, he is wanting his listeners to make a logical decision. He says, (1) “You are bad, yet give good gifts to your children who ask, (2) God is better than you, therefore (3) you should ask expectantly of God.”

In addition to *a fortiori* arguments, Jesus used *reductio ad absurdum* arguments in defense of his identity.<sup>23</sup> For example, when Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan, he responds in this way:

Every kingdom divided against itself is destroyed, and no town or house divided against itself will stand. So if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?<sup>24</sup>

This argument can be broken down in this way:

1. If I drive out demons by the power of Satan, Satan's kingdom would be divided.
2. If Satan's kingdom were divided, it would be ruined.
3. It is absurd to think that Satan's kingdom is ruined based on the evidence of continued demonic activity.
4. Therefore, Satan's kingdom is not divided.
5. Therefore, I do not act by the power of Satan when I drive out demons.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose in laying out Jesus' arguments here is not to apply modern philosophical labels to Jesus' rhetoric, but rather to help one see that Jesus understood the importance of using sound reasoning in defending the nature of God and his own identity. As Machen concludes, "Even our Lord, who spoke in the plenitude of divine authority, did condescend to reason with men."<sup>26</sup> And if Jesus was willing to reason with men, believers need not be concerned that appealing to human reasoning somehow sidesteps Scripture's call to faith.

## 5. THE APOSTLE PAUL UNABASHEDLY USED REASON TO CALL PEOPLE TO FAITH

Paul was not anti-intellectual. Prior to becoming a believer, he had been well-educated, and his missionary efforts and epistles indicate that he put that education to use. He did not see mental engagement as a hindrance to understanding or living the gospel but as an essential part of being a mature believer. For example, after laying out an argument for salvation through faith alone in the opening eleven chapters of Romans, Paul shifts his instruction to how the believer should live. In doing so, he highlights the centrality of the mind in Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

For Paul, the renewing of the mind was essential to wisdom-filled discipleship as it allowed believers to "tear down arguments and every arrogant obstacle that is raised up against the knowledge of God."<sup>27</sup> Never does he

encourage intellectual laziness or neglect, but rather calls believers to "take every thought captive to make it obey Christ," knowing that zeal without knowledge can be dangerous,<sup>28</sup> not just for the life of the believer but also for unbelievers who would receive ill-formed or inaccurate arguments for the faith.

In keeping with Paul's call to renew one's mind, it was customary on his missionary journeys for him to present a public case for Christ. For example, in Thessalonica, we are told that the Apostle went to the synagogue on three successive Sabbaths where "he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead."<sup>29</sup> The three verbs describing Paul's activity do not in any way suggest a haphazard approach. Paul used his own intellect, which was largely formed under the direction of the famed Gamaliel, to formulate arguments that led to persuasive conclusions. As his audience was made up of Jews as well as God-fearing Greeks who likely recognized the authority of the Old Testament, Paul built his arguments on the common ground of Jewish Scriptures. We are told that as a result of his preaching some "were *persuaded* and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large group of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women."<sup>30</sup>

## 6. FAITH WITHOUT REASON IS AWKWARD

Perhaps the reason Christians see a conflict between faith and an apologetic presentation of Christianity is because of an errant view of faith. For many, faith is believing without evidence, but biblically faith is believing in light of the evidence of a trustworthy God who demonstrates himself in time and space. Consider when John the Baptist began to doubt Jesus' identity. Although it was John who declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God, when in prison John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if indeed he was the Christ. What was Jesus' reply? It was not to have more faith. It was to point John to the evidence:

"Go tell John what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them."<sup>31</sup>

In pointing John to this evidence, Jesus knew that John's faith would be bolstered, because again faith is not found in the absence of evidence but in its presence.

Let's suppose, however, that faith was somehow of a better quality if held in the absence of evidence or reason. This would mean that the less we knew of Christ or the more ungrounded our explanation of God's work in the world, the more room we would have for faith. Given this position, one might as well no longer attend church, read the Bible, or listen to anything that might tell us of God, because anything we would learn from those activities would give us less reason for faith!

Perhaps even more awkward is the reasoned efforts of some to argue for a non-reasoned faith. Some even attempt to use Scripture to build their case for an extra-moral faith. But one must wonder how so-called reasoned Scriptural arguments can be used to negate the very role of reason in understanding the revelation of God. Undoubtedly such an effort is self-defeating.

Christians are called to faith. Scripture asks for no less, and Jesus and the apostles specifically say that faith is necessary for salvation. But the faith to which we are called is not a mindless faith; it is one that is based in solid facts and sound reasoning that must be processed by the mind. And this is why apologetic arguments are so

valuable. They do not undermine faith; they help provide the very basis for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Deut.13:1-3; Acts 17:11; Gal. 1:8; 1 John 4:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *Loving God with All Your Mind: Thinking as a Christian in the Postmodern World*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 22.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of verses that indicate that knowledge, and sometimes even certainty, can be attained, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 193-199.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quotations taken from the *NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Passages that emphasize our ability to know things to be objectively true include Ezek. 5:13, Luke 1:3-4, Acts 2:22, 1 Cor 8:2.

<sup>6</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity? And Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), 166.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 1:18

<sup>8</sup> Prov. 4:7

<sup>9</sup> John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), loc. 1210-15, Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Tim. 4:15-16; 2 Tim. 2:15

<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet. 3:15

<sup>12</sup> Mark 12:30

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 8:10, 9:22, 15, 28; Mark 2:5, 10:52; Luke 7:50, 18:42

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 14:31, 16:8, 24.

<sup>15</sup> John 1:36, 5:33

<sup>16</sup> John 5:36

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 3:17; John 5:37

<sup>18</sup> John 5:39, 46; Luke 24:25-27

<sup>19</sup> John 7:17

<sup>20</sup> John 15:27; Phillip Anthony Gray, "Training Preachers in Christian Apologetics in the 21st Century" (DMin thesis, Erskine Theological Seminary, 1999), 212-13.

<sup>21</sup> An *a fortiori* argument takes existing confidence in a particular proposition to argue in favor of confidence in a second proposition by suggesting that there is more reason to believe in the second than the first. For examples of Jesus using this form of argument, see Luke 12:4-5, 6-7, 24, 27-28, 54-56, 14:1-6; 18:1-8.

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 7:9-11

<sup>23</sup> This type of argument is used to expose the weakness of a given proposition by showing that its premises lead to absurd or illogical conclusions. See also Matthew 22:41-46.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 12:25b-27a

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Jesus: Philosopher and Apologist," *Christian Research Journal* 25, no. 2 (2002): 52.

<sup>26</sup> Machen, *What is Christianity?*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Cor. 10:4-5

<sup>28</sup> Rom. 10:1-3

<sup>29</sup> Acts 17:2-3, NIV

<sup>30</sup> Acts 17:4

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 11:3-5