

Apologetics and the Gospel

By Dr John Whitcomb

How much do we need scientific evidence and intellectual arguments in Gospel witness?



My personal experience with Christian apologetics began in February 1943, when I was a student at Princeton University.

It had not been my privilege to be raised in a Christian home, nor to attend a Bible-teaching church. But God, in His grace, used a couple of Christian students at the university to invite me time and time again to attend a weekly Bible class being taught by a Princeton alumnus and former missionary to India.

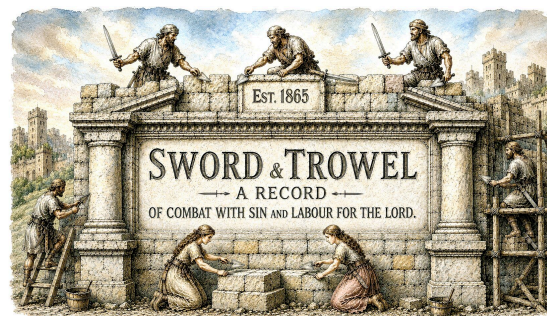
The Gospel message was graciously presented, and after several months of such teaching I surrendered to the claims and the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As far as I could tell there were no other Christians in the student hall where I stayed at that time. But I had made several good friends, one of whom was a sophisticated intellectual from a wealthy home. I was convinced that the conversion of such a man could bring great changes in the student hall, so one day I invited him to attend our Bible class.

My hopes were high because I was prepared to convince him that no one else could match this Bible teacher who had led me to the Lord. The conversation, as I recall over the years, proceeded as follows: “Harry, here is a teacher who can really make the message of the Bible clear and convincing. Why not come with me on Sunday afternoon and see for yourself?”

“The Bible?” he replied. “Why should I take time to study a religious book that is already nearly two thousand years out of date? You know yourself that there isn’t a single science professor here at Princeton who takes the Bible seriously on the origin of the world. The idea of creation by divine fiat is no longer held by intelligent people. I really have no interest in the Bible.”

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Rejection!

Stung by this flat rejection of God’s Word on the basis of scientific consensus, I retreated to my Christian friends. Were there any publications of a scholarly nature, I asked, that could help my friend see the weaknesses of evolutionism and thus the possibility of supernatural creation?

Except for a few small booklets, nothing came to hand; armed with these I approached Harry again. He was surprisingly gracious. “Thanks for going to all the trouble of collecting these booklets for me. I really didn’t know anyone who could write took Genesis literally any more. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Some day, if I ever have the time, I’ll look into it.”

That was it. A polite but final brush-off.

I was deeply dismayed at this and similar failures to convert my friends to Christianity, and so I discussed the problem with my Bible teacher.

“What’s wrong with me?” I asked. “Is it my personality, or do I need more time to collect better arguments?”

Instead of lecturing his new disciple on the intricacies of biblical apologetics, he very wisely invited me to join him in a brief visitation programme in one of the other student halls where a new student had five months earlier somewhat rashly filled in a survey card indicating his interest in attending our Bible study class.

Hiding behind Jonah

As the door swung open in response to our knock, pipe smoke poured out into the hallway.

“I’m John Whitcomb,” I said, “and this is the Bible teacher of the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship. Is Tom Smith here?” A trampling of feet and the crash of a table lamp were heard as various figures fled in terror, leaving our victim to fend for himself against these unwanted intruders.

“The Princeton Evangelical Fellowship?” The unfortunate made a show of recollection. “Oh, yes, I guess I did sign a card last fall but I’m not interested in the Bible any more. I used to think it was true, but five months of study here has been enough to convince me it is full of errors.”

“I’m fascinated to hear you say that,” my teacher quietly commented. “Tell me, what particular errors did you discover in the Bible that convinced you it is not true?”

This was unexpected. Was a firm rebuff not sufficient to end this uncomfortable conversation? Surely the general consensus of this great university was sufficient to silence anyone who still believed the Bible to be true?

Tom thought for a moment and answered, “Jonah and the whale! There’s your proof. No educated person today could believe for one moment that a whale could have swallowed a man and then spat him out on the shore alive three days later!”

Here was the crisis for me. How could we handle this direct challenge to the historicity of the book of Jonah? Perhaps we could find in the university library some books on whales that would demonstrate their ability to swallow men alive. Perhaps we could even find historical evidence of men who had actually survived

such an ordeal. That would convince him that the book of Jonah is as infallible as the rest of the Bible!

Providentially, it was my teacher who answered him first.

“Tom, I’m frankly very thankful that it is the book of Jonah you seem to be struggling with. There is no more fascinating book in the Old Testament than Jonah. Some day, if we have time, I would like to discuss with you the entire message of that book, which was alluded to by Christ himself for a very important reason.

“In the meantime, however, would you mind if I explained to you why I have come to believe that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore true in all its parts?”

Impressed with the irresistible graciousness and confidence of this man who seemed to know from personal experience the God of whom he spoke, Tom gave his cautious consent.

“Tom, I really felt the way you do about God’s Word when I was a student here thirty years ago. I thought I had all the answers I needed concerning life. But I was wrong. In his infinite love, God reached down to me in my deep personal need and showed me through the familiar words of his matchless Book that my root problem was sin—deliberate alienation from God himself.”

The power of testimony

What he heard was not a scientific, historical, or philosophical defence of Christianity but a Gospel-saturated testimony directed prayerfully to his heart.

As I recall the conversation, Tom did raise some questions about Christianity and the Bible. The questions were not totally ignored, but the answers were always amplified by new perspectives on the Gospel and appeals for surrender to Christ. It was this approach that ultimately led to a proud university student acknowledging the lordship of Christ in his life.

All of this forced me to take a new look at some basic factors of Christian apologetics that I had seriously neglected. I have come to believe that my initial ignorance concerning these biblical principles also characterises many frustrated and fruitless Christian workers today.

My problem was basically twofold. I had underestimated the depth of man’s rebellion against God, and I was unaware of the absolutely crucial part which the Word of God must have, through the convicting and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, in bringing sinful men to Christ.

It will be my purpose in this article to examine biblical revelation concerning man’s spiritual inability, God’s method of reaching lost men, major proof texts for rationalistic apologetics, and the part which Christian evidences may have in our ministry of witnessing today.

Reckoning without man's fallen nature

In our efforts to make the Bible and Christianity attractive and acceptable to men, we find ourselves immediately confronted with two stupendous obstacles: man's fallen nature and the Satanic forces which surround him. Though these facts should come as no great surprise to one who is even superficially acquainted with Christianity, it is astonishing to me how few of the better known evangelical works on Christian apologetics today give them serious consideration.

One is almost led to believe, when reading such books, that what we really need to win intellectuals to Christ (in addition to the Gospel) is an arsenal of carefully developed arguments against the various false religious and philosophical systems we may confront today and/or an impressive array of evidences from, say, archaeology and history, that the Bible and Christianity are true.^[1]

But if we are to be truly honest with the biblical perspectives on this question, we must admit that we have too often been guilty of building our systems of apologetics upon foundations other than the one set forth in Scripture.

Instead of giving us the impression that men are eagerly waiting for proof that Christianity is true, we find the Bible exposing men's hearts as sealed shut against any and all finite pressures for conversion.

The basic problem of the non-Christian is not merely academic and intellectual. It is moral and spiritual. The Bible indicates that all unbelievers (including so-called honest doubters) are enemies of God, under divine judgement because of their deliberate distortion of all reality to fit into their own spiritual frame of reference.

There is not the slightest desire in the natural man to seek him, find him, and acknowledge him for who he is. "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts" (Psalm 10:4).

On another occasion, the Holy Spirit informs us by the pen of David that "the Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God" (Psalm 14:2). But what did he see? "They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Also quoted in Romans 3:10—12.)

Not only does the unbeliever not seek and practise truth, he consistently suppresses whatever truth he *does* receive: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [suppress] the truth in unrighteousness... they are without excuse" (Romans 1:18—20).

In fact, the Scriptures make it clear that fallen men, far from being open to arguments about God's claims upon them, are in a state of enmity against him: "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

The mind's desperate state ...

Christian apologetics have been traditionally concerned with giving rational answers to the challenges of unbelievers concerning God's special revelation in Scripture. But what kind of minds are

we appealing to? To what extent have sin and spiritual rebellion against God affected man’s rational capacities?

Ponder these statements: “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world ... fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Ephesians 2:1–3). “Walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Ephesians 4:17–18).

But is the human ‘mind’ not capable of detaching itself from the so-called ‘heart’ and drawing its own conclusions about God independently of the downward direction of fallen nature? The answer is—no.

Mark our Lord’s explanation of the unbreakable relationship between the mind and the heart: “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts” (Matthew 15:19; cf Mark 7:21). The Scriptures offer us no hope of bringing about a fundamental change in a man’s thinking about God apart from a profound change in his ‘heart’—the moral and spiritual centre of his personal being.

... and Satan’s opposition

In addition to the obstacle of the human ‘heart-mind’ being in utter opposition to the truth of God, there is the obstacle of Satan, the god of this world, and his demonic forces. When I speak to an unbeliever about Christ, I am not really speaking to one person but to two or more persons, all but one of whom is invisible.

The apostle Paul spoke of this fact several times. He explained that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

He knew that Christians formerly walked “according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). He recognised that, “if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4).

In the parable of the sower, our Lord also spoke of this obstacle to the reception of his Word when he identified the birds that devoured the seed: “When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side” (Matthew 13:19).

A system of Christian apologetics that underestimates the power of Satan in the minds of unbelievers may not exactly be guilty of reviling angelic majesties, as Jude warns us, but by ignoring the extent of Satan’s power, it is unable to follow Michael’s example and to say effectively: “The Lord rebuke thee” (Jude 9). What we desperately need today is an apologetic with power!

If the biblical picture of man’s enmity against God and control by Satan is correct, then how can Christians ever persuade men to turn from sin and Satan to the true and living God?

The biblical answer, of course, is that they *cannot*.

The Scriptures do not say that it is *difficult* for the unbeliever to accept spiritual truth. They say that it is *impossible*. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: *neither can he know them*, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

When our Lord once made a similar pronouncement concerning an entire segment of society, his disciples “were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?” His answer provides for us the key to all truly effective Christian apologetics today: “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:25–26).

It seems quite obvious, then, that God never intended that Christians should win the lost through purely philosophical and academic arguments, or even that they should by these means remove the mental obstacles within unbelievers so that the Word of God might penetrate their hearts.

If this had been God’s plan, the vast majority of Christians throughout history would have been automatically disqualified from effective witness, for they would have been unable to meet highly educated unbelievers on their own level in intellectual debate.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise... that no flesh should glory in his presence” (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

Conversion must precede the solving of intellectual problems

The biblical method of winning men to Christ (including the intellectuals of our day) is to lovingly, patiently and prayerfully present the true Gospel according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3–4) from the context of a godly life (1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:3–12). Only the quick, and powerful Word of God can penetrate the unbeliever’s shield of defence and pierce into his heart (Hebrews 4:12), and thus only God may receive the glory for the genuine conversion of sinful men.

Once converted by God’s Holy Spirit, a man for the first time in his life enjoys the proper perspective and frame of reference for analysing his intellectual problems concerning Christian doctrines, even if he never finds the complete answers this side of Heaven.

Paul’s own conversion is an instructive illustration of this divine dynamic. Instead of presenting a list of questions to the Lord Jesus when he was overwhelmed by his presence on the Damascus road, Saul of Tarsus simply cried out, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). With his spiritual blindness removed by God, “straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

He was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19) even though it must have required years for him to rethink everything that he had previously learned about the Scriptures in the light of this transforming new revelation. The book of Acts contains numerous examples of such proclamations of God’s revealed message, resulting in conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit and genuine conversion (Acts 2:36–38; 8:34–36; 10:42–48; 16:31–34).

Exposing the heart

Another important New Testament example of this approach to Christian apologetics may be found in Paul’s admonition to the Corinthian church to turn from worldly wisdom and from an unwarranted glorying in certain sign-gifts in order that they might give themselves to the clear proclamation of God’s Word.

He said: “But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth” (1 Corinthians 14:24–25).^[2] It is perfectly obvious from this remarkable passage that neither human wisdom nor empirical signs were an adequate substitute for the clear proclamation of God’s Word.

However, if the Christian communicator constantly appeals to God’s Word in order to establish its truth in the mind of the unbeliever, is he not guilty of reasoning in a circle? If the unbeliever refuses to accept the Scriptures as divinely inspired, should not the communicator temporarily abandon the Bible until he has demonstrated its truth independently by appealing to the vast array of archaeological, historical, scientific, and other facts that tend to confirm its claims?

The answer to this question is—no. If Christianity is merely one circle of truth to be conditioned and defined by other circles of truth, then it is not true at all! For the Scriptures boldly and consistently claim to be God’s eternal, all-inclusive, unique, final, and absolutely authoritative Word. This is the absolutely crucial foundation of true Christian apologetics.

When the Christian appeals to God’s Word he is appealing to the only ultimate circle of truth concerning God and spiritual realities. This circle is so vast and profound that it includes everything that exists, both within and beyond the universe, both visible and invisible—including the unbeliever himself and the very god of this world who blinds him!

To turn off the light of God’s Word, as it were, in order to establish first a ‘common ground’ with the unbeliever is thus to abandon truth in order to grope together with an unregenerate mind in the darkness that characterises this world-system apart from God.

Revealed truth is self-authenticating and self-vindicating, like light. Peter stated: “ye do well that ye take heed [to the Word of God], as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn” (2 Peter 1:19).

Argument or illumination?

Imagine a man lost within the deep recesses of a dark underground cavern in utter despair of ever finding his way out. If a friend had a general idea of his location, how could he best come

to his rescue? Should he rush into the cave, careless of his pathway, and sit with him in the darkness, sharing with him the common ground of being lost?

Would it not be much wiser to take along a powerful torch, marking his path as he enters the cavern so that he could retrace his steps to the safety of the world above?

However, suppose that the lost man, in his utter despair, refused to believe that his friend had a torch and that there was a way out? Should the would-be rescuer sit there in the darkness and argue with him concerning the size, make, power, and previous performance of his torch?

Since the lost man still has the capacity to recognise light when he sees it, should not his friend immediately end the debate by inviting him to look at the light as he switches on the torch?

Man’s amazing capacity to hear and to see in the physical realm did not come about by chance. “The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of them” (Proverbs 20:12). Neither is man’s capacity to recognise God’s truth a product of chance. Every human being has this capacity and will be judged by the Creator on the basis of his use of it. John tells us that Christ is “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). Thus, man has an innate knowledge of his Creator: “That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them” (Romans 1:19).

When, therefore, a man is confronted with Christ, the Light of the world, it is no help to him to humour him when he demands another light first. When a Christian apologist turns off the light of his Lord and begins groping to find light from the general consensus of scientific opinion, he has entered into a spiritual cavern from which there is no escape.

What he must do is to keep the heart and mind of his unbelieving friend exposed to God’s Word in one way or another, all the time praying that the Spirit of God might bring conviction of sin and a willingness to trust the Saviour. If he does not respond to God’s infallible Word, which is his special revelation, what assurance do we gain from the Bible that he will respond to the witness of general revelation, such as the various theistic proofs for God’s personal existence and historical evidences for the truth of Christianity?

Criticism of the direct approach

The Christian who adopts such a Bible-centred method must, however, prepare himself for intense criticism, even from fellow Christians.

To subordinate rationalistic argumentation to the supremacy of Scripture is to cut across the grain of all our natural inclinations and invites the accusation of obscurantism.

“After all,” we are being told on every side, “with so many false religions, cults, and philosophies in the world today, is it not the right and responsibility of an intelligent person to investigate carefully the validity of Christianity in comparison with other possible alternatives before making a final decision?”

Again, the answer is—no. Christianity is not simply one of several available religious truth systems. Nor is our Lord Jesus Christ just

one of several saviours we may investigate at our leisure and on our own terms.

Furthermore, our intelligent investigator is far from being neutral and unbiased in spiritual matters. He cannot sit in judgement with complete objectivity as one religion after another passes in review, waiting to find one that is logically coherent, historically and scientifically factual, and personally satisfying before adopting it as his own.

Quite to the contrary, men are active enemies of the one true God of revelation and redemption, in whose image and likeness we have all been created and in whom “we live, and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). While it is true that the divine image has been marred through the Fall, it is nevertheless very much intact (Genesis 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9).

Men inwardly know that God is true!

It is precisely because man does bear God’s image that he inwardly knows who this God is. That is why he runs away from God and his Word and hides his face from him (cf Genesis 3:10; Isaiah 53:3). That is why he also hinders or suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) and “hateth the light, neither cometh to the light” (John 3:20).

Sinful men cannot innocently claim that God is an unknown entity to them, “because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Romans 1:21).

These are the reasons why sinful men actually have no right to demand ‘proper credentials’ when the Creator says to them: “Repent! Believe my Word! Obey me—now!” When the Holy Spirit says to the human heart, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” it is potential suicide to procrastinate, investigate or debate.

“Behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). “God... now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30). God may graciously prolong the appeal, but sinful man cannot presume upon this!

Let us look at the matter from a different perspective. If an unregenerate man actually did have the right to demand full intellectual satisfaction concerning the claims of God’s Word before accepting them, he would be the greatest of fools for settling for anything less than a complete demonstration.

But in order to have such a demonstration he would have to examine carefully all the pertinent facts and every possible alternative before receiving Christ as his Lord. Of course, he would die long before he could arrive at the place where he could make a decision on this basis. Such an approach to Christian apologetics is not only unbiblical but it leads to logical absurdities!

To give an unbeliever the impression that he has a right to demand answers to all the rational problems relating to the Bible and Christianity before he repents of his sin and turns to Christ for forgiveness is to set him up on a pedestal of intellectual and spiritual pride from which he will never descend. What can such endless debates actually accomplish in preparing such a person for the day when “God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel” (Romans 2:16)?

What can be said for such rationalistic apologetics when God has commissioned us to present all the counsel of God (cf Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 20:27; 2 Timothy 2:2; 4:2)? And how do we respond to Paul’s admonition to Timothy: “be gentle unto all men, apt to teach [revealed truth], patient, in meekness instructing [with Scripture] those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil” (2 Timothy 2:24–26)?

The best ‘apologist’

If the New Testament is our infallible guide in such matters, we must conclude that the Christian who will be most effectively used by God in winning people to Christ is not the one who knows the most about secular philosophy, psychology, history, archaeology, or natural science (important though these disciplines may be in their proper place in developing a comprehensive Christian world- and life-view). It will be the Christian who knows most about God’s Word, and who humbly seeks God’s daily strength and wisdom in obeying it.

The best Christian apologist is the best student of Scripture, who, to use the Bible’s own terms to describe him, is “a workman that needeth not to be ashamed [because he is] rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

He will be a man like Apollos, “mighty in the scriptures... instructed in the way of the Lord... [who] spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord”, so that by God’s Word “he mightily convinced unbelievers” (Acts 18:24–28).

The writer finds himself in complete agreement with those who insist that Christianity is supremely rational. This is not because the Christian understands everything that God has revealed, for even the apostle Paul refused to make such a claim (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 13:9; see also 2 Peter 3:16).

The reason why one must insist on the essential rationality of God’s inscripturated revelation is that God himself is infinite reason. His thoughts can be communicated to us effectively and in truth. The Bible is perspicuous—able to be understood (1 John 2:20 and 27). However, man’s finiteness will prevent him from knowing God exhaustively.

The Gospel may be foolishness to them that perish (1 Corinthians 1:18), but it is not intrinsically foolish; it is perfect and infinite wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:20–29). Thus, the Christian message is ultimately rational. But this is very far from saying that the Christian message can be communicated rationalistically to lost men.

The apostle Peter, by the Spirit of God, commanded each believer to “be ready always to give an answer [*apologian*] to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Does this mean that the Christian must go outside the sphere of revelational truth to provide intellectual and academic justification for his faith in God’s Word to the unbeliever? Could Peter himself have fulfilled such a command in view of his very limited background?

Would the apostle Paul, who was widely known for his great learning (Acts 26:24; cf 22:3), have indulged in such pursuits for the philosophically-minded Corinthians in view of his avowed determination “not to know anything among you, save Jesus

Christ, and him crucified...That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:2 and 5)? Hardly so.

One therefore suspects from the very outset that the very popular semi-rationalistic interpretation of 1 Peter 3:15 is misguided.^[3] This suspicion is confirmed by an examination of the immediate context of the passage. Peter was writing to persecuted Christians who were being terrorised by their pagan neighbours. They were commanded, however, not to sink into despair, but to recognise their truly ‘blessed’ situation.

“Not many wise”

Furthermore, they were neither to fear nor to be troubled. But why should they adopt such an attitude? Was it because they knew they could out-manoeuvre their enemies in intellectual debate? Definitely not. Early Christians did not include many wise men according to the flesh among their number.

Their confidence was really based upon their spiritual resources in Christ the Lord, whom they were to sanctify in their hearts.

Furthermore, the words that follow Peter’s command to “be ready always to give an answer” are highly significant. This defence is to be made “with meekness and fear” and with “a good conscience; that... they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.”

Note carefully that these conditions have nothing to do with rationalistic debate, for a basic assumption underlying such debate is that a correct answer is effective regardless of the presence or absence of meekness, reverence or godliness in the one giving the answer. But in a spiritual witness to the truth of God, these factors are absolutely vital.

We must have no confidence in human reasoning

It is clear from this passage, then, that no spiritually effective answers can be given to unregenerate people by Christians concerning the hope that is in them until they have learned to sanctify the Lord God in their own hearts. But what does this really mean?

The term ‘sanctify’ in this context presupposes that Christians are themselves sanctified or holy—set apart for God.

In the immediate context, then, Peter is saying that the believer must confess his inability to convert men by mere human reasonings, and own God’s unique and sovereign ability to do the converting. He must learn to pray that the God who knows the hearts of all men and who knows how to penetrate those hearts with his own Word, will present his Word, by his Spirit, to the hearers, and be glorified by the results.

During the 1944 Ardennes campaign in Belgium, better known as the Battle of the Bulge, the writer served as a fire direction computer in a US field artillery battalion. It was his job to sit with two other men in a basement behind the front lines and to telephone directions to the artillerymen who handled the twelve 105mm guns.

The really dangerous job was entrusted to the forward observer, usually a lieutenant. He had to position himself in a high place

near enough to the front lines to see enemy tanks approaching.

When the tanks came into view, a potential crisis emerged. He could either panic, or follow strict instructions. If he panicked and fled to the rear, the tanks would proceed unchallenged, and the battle might be lost, including the forward observer. Or, he might rush toward the tanks and start firing on them himself. That would also prove disastrous to him, and to his military unit.

There was, however, a third alternative. That would be to ‘sanctify’ the field artillery in his heart! In other words, he could follow instructions and phone the fire direction computers, giving them the number, size, location and apparent speed and direction of movement of the enemy tanks, confessing thereby his inability to handle them in his own strength, and the ability of the field artillery to do the job which he could not do.

It hardly seems necessary to explain that once the artillery had located those tanks, they were in desperate danger. As dozens of armour-piercing shells whistled over the head of the forward observer and penetrated the tanks one by one, exploding inside, he was giving his greatest apologetic to the challenge that confronted him.

As God’s ‘forward observers’ in Satan’s world of demons and fallen men, Christians must learn to call upon Christ their Lord. No other system has ever really worked, nor ever shall.

What, then, is the ‘answer’ that each of us must be prepared to give to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us? The answer must be basically God’s Word, not our own word. God’s thoughts are vastly higher than our thoughts, and his words penetrate far deeper into men’s hearts than our words.

“It is written!”

In every sincere soul-winning effort, the believer soon discovers that his own words are dead, inactive and dull.

But “the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

It was Christ the Lord who set the apologetic example for all believers when he thrice defeated Satan with accurate, appropriate quotations from the Word of God, and with the formula—“It is written.” In his great confrontation with unbelieving Pharisees in John 8:12–59, our Lord appealed constantly to basic spiritual realities, such as the witness of his Father, rather than to sign-miracles. It is noteworthy that “as he spake these words, many believed on him” (verse 30).

Do modern Christians sometimes feel that they have, because of archaeological, historical, scientific, and other discoveries that

shed light on the Scriptures, a superior apologetic to that of our Lord and his apostles, and of the early church?

If so, they have not really sanctified the Lord God in their hearts, and their answers to lost men can bring neither conviction nor conversion in the biblical sense of those terms.

God's work must be done in God's way if it is to receive God's approval (cf 1 Corinthians 3:10–15).

¹ For example, John Warwick Montgomery boldly asserts: “Non-Christian positions must be destroyed factually and the Christian religion established factually. Any lesser procedure is the abrogation of apologetic responsibility to a fallen world” (*Once Upon An A Priori, in Jerusalem and Athens*, ed by E R Geehan [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co 1971], p388). [\[back\]](#)

² Bernard Ramm is obviously quite wrong to say: “If a man has a prejudice against the Gospel it is the function of apologetics and evidences to remove that prejudice ... Apologetics and Christian evidences cut down these objections to enable the Gospel once again to directly confront the consciousness of a man” (*Protestant Christian Evidences* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1953], pp 15-16). [\[back\]](#)

³ Whereas pure rationalism in apologetics would claim that unbelievers can be argued directly into the kingdom, semi-rationalism claims that—”The purpose of apologetics is always merely to clear away the intellectual obstructions so that the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit may do their work,” (Edward John Carnell, *How Every Christian Can Defend His Faith*, in *Moody Monthly*, February 1950). [\[back\]](#)

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