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## THE CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST'S MORAL COMPASS

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Apologetics is now hot stuff to more folks. For this, we should be deeply thankful, since the one, true gospel is being defended publicly as true and reasonable in churches, the public square, and on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> But with popularity comes the danger of zeal getting ahead of knowledge and character. Christian defenders need to know the arguments of apologetics, but they must also find their moral bearings to bear the truth nobly. After thirty-five years of studying, teaching, and writing about apologetics as a philosopher, I discern the need for some explicit instruction, especially since I know of no other treatment of the subject.

Codes of conduct are ancient. The Hippocratic Oath, affirmed for centuries by physicians, predates Christianity. However, Christians avowed it until recently. Medical schools made it a part of their teaching.<sup>2</sup> The departure came with the rise of permissive abortion, which came with a decline in respect for humanity.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible is the Christian's ultimate source for the knowledge of God and is our moral compass (2 Tim. 3:15–16),<sup>4</sup> but Christians have for centuries summarized its teachings in creeds, confessions, and doctrinal statements. *The Didache*, an early Christian code, dates to the middle to late first century. It is divided into "the way of life" and "the way of death." It distills moral instruction in clear terms, which is the goal of this essay. Consider its first two points:

*There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways.*

*The way of life is this: "First, you shalt love the God who made thee, secondly, thy neighbor as thyself; and whatsoever thou wouldst not have done to thyself, do not thou to another."*

It also warns of the "way of death":

*But the Way of Death is this: First of all, it is wicked and full of cursing, murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, witchcrafts, charms, robberies, false witness, hypocrisies, a double heart, fraud, pride, malice, stubbornness, covetousness, foul speech, jealousy, impudence, haughtiness, boastfulness.*

This is no small issue. As Francis Schaeffer warns, even the Christian can bring forth bad fruit, “the fruit of the devil.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we must examine motives and consider our means in apologetics, as in every area of life (1 Cor. 10:31). I begin with character and then address competence, although both are absolutely necessary for a God-honoring apologetic. As Paul told Timothy, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Paul, the great apologist, heeded his own advice when he wrote hyperbolically, “No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor. 9:27).

### **A CHRISTIAN CALLING**

First, *all* Christians are called to give a defense of their Christian convictions, to be ready to explain why they believe what they believe (1 Pet. 3:15). This is not a special calling, but a command for every follower of Christ. Moreover, apologetic competence does not require a lifetime of specialized research and public ministry.<sup>6</sup> Wise witnesses need not be experts. However, even those not called to apologetics as a specialty should still grow in their knowledge of Scripture, how to defend it, and to support those who are called to apologetics specialization. Our giving to God’s work should not ignore apologetics, especially since the academic education needed for apologetics is expensive and because so many apologetics ministries are lacking in funds.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the apologist should check his moral motives in arguing for Christianity and against false worldviews. Our ruling passion should be to make the gospel and its implications known to the entire world (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–49). As one develops intellectual confidence in Christian truth, one is often tempted to be arrogant and prideful in one’s knowledge. Pride does not automatically accrue to the learned. The answer to pride is not ignorance. Paul was one of the most learned men of the first century, as can be seen by reading the Book of Romans or his Athenian address (Acts 17:16–34). Yet Paul, despite his great passions, was not arrogant in his knowledge. He did not defend a gospel he invented, but the gospel of grace.<sup>8</sup> “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). He described himself this way: “This *is* a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:5 KJV; see also 1 Cor. 15:9).

### **HUMILITY**

Being humble but knowledgeable should stem from Christian love: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” (1 Cor. 13:4). Part of loving our neighbors as ourselves is communicating the gospel to them in winsome ways. As the apostle commands: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap

of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24–26). If the apologist has been resentful, arrogant, or unloving in some other way, he should ask God for forgiveness and the strength to amend his ways. God will forgive and give hope (1 John 1:9; Rom. 15:13).

Being humble before God and man demands that we do not promote ourselves. Only by God’s grace are we servants of God and of His saving truth (Eph. 2:8–9). We promote the Christian worldview and the gospel. Paul, as usual, cuts to the quick: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

In our culture of celebrity worship and endless ego casting, some think that promotion of one’s image or brand is all-important. Apologists may pose and preen and promote themselves in ways that are not modest, but rather showy and even narcissistic. This does not honor God. As Paul said, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). Proverbs cautions, “Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth; an outsider, and not your own lips” (Prov. 27:2).

Rather than packaging and selling an image, the apologist should build his ministry on integrity, service, repentance, and prayer. Paul exhorts us to follow his lead: “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). Jesus models service: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). As the Suffering Servant promised, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12; Isa. 53). The gospel defender should trust that the Lord, who lacks neither power nor goodness, will bring about apologetic blessing as He sees fit (Ps. 62). God’s work in His way should be our only way. Christians should not cut corners, since God wants integrity (Titus 2:7).

### SACRIFICIAL SERVICE

Important apologetic encounters may come when the spotlight has been turned off. Some of the most meaningful moments of apologetic outreach for me come through impromptu conversations *after* the formal message. Thus, my goal is to be the last person to leave the room. I converse with anyone who stays afterward. I have been chased out of rooms by janitors. However, some well-known Christian apologists are too busy to talk and pray with people after their talks. They have “more important” things at hand. Staying late can be tiring and disrupt your precious schedule. Nonetheless, fatigue is often required of love. Consider Isaiah’s words to God’s people: “Yet you have not called on me, Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel” (Isa. 43:22). Jesus preached and defended an extraordinary ethic: “And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Matt. 5:41–42).

Godly service in apologetics also requires modesty and suitability in dress and comportment. All bombast, manipulation, and abuse of humor<sup>9</sup> must be shunned in exchange for “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Those with strong personalities and sharp wits may fall into entertaining or hectoring an audience instead of edifying it. Attractive men and women can also fall into sartorial sin by emphasizing their good looks. Both women and men are to blame, but we must say that it is more common for women (see Prov. 30:30; 1 Tim. 1:9–10). Apologists can check their appearance by asking a good friend, spouse, or pastor whether an outfit is “too much.”<sup>10</sup> This usually means *too* tight, *too* revealing, or *too* ostentatious.

The curse of over-self-promotion is especially tempting in social media.<sup>11</sup> Apologists may be tempted to plaster their photographs everywhere, which is not an expression of humility. Moreover, given the limits of Facebook and the like, communication may be misunderstood, irony and sarcasm may go unnoticed or be misinterpreted, and good motives taken for bad. Restraint is in order. Self-control, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, needs to be exercised in social media. As Jesus promised, “The meek will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5; 11:27).

### SEEKING KNOWLEDGE

On the other hand, those gaining in apologetic confidence should not be timid or cowardly. We are responsible for what we know. Our lives must conform to our convictions. Our first parents were responsible to obey what they *knew* about God (Gen. 1–2); all the covenants in Scripture hold the recipients responsible to observe what had been made *known* by God in the covenant (see Deut. 8, 28); and Jesus condemned those who claimed they did not have enough reason to believe that He was who He said He was. He spoke against some of the most *knowledgeable* men of His time because they did not translate their *knowledge* into action. “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matt. 23:1–3; James 2:14–26).

In other words, they were irresponsible in not acting on what they knew; therefore, they suppressed the truth. This is a theme that Paul expands on in Romans 1:18–32. Consider another of Jesus’ sayings: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt. 11:23).

But good character must also involve intellectual readiness. As Peter wrote, “Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming” (1 Pet. 1:13). One who serves as an intellectual “ambassador for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20) needs to be conversant in apologetics in general as well as in particular areas of apologetics. He should also know his limits. (For example, I have never pretended to be an expert in Satanism or how to defend Christianity to a Satanist.) Apologetic readiness demands a lifetime of ongoing study. Christians must out-think the world for Christ. This cannot be done on the cheap. Consider some of the prerequisites for apologetic engagement.

First, the apologist needs a strong and growing knowledge of the Scriptures. Ideally, one should know the original language of the Bible or at least be able to use the language tools for interpretation. The apologist should also commit Bible verses to memory (Ps. 119:11), especially those pertaining to the nature of Christ and salvation through Christ (John 3:16; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5). He should also know how to bring Scripture into conversations in a natural but courageous way.<sup>12</sup>

Second, one cannot be a complete apologist without a complete commitment to the purity of the gospel of God's grace. In this dark world, it is all too easy to stray from the gospel itself. Paul lamented over this defection by the Galatians, who had mixed grace with works of the law as the basis of salvation. His words should make all who defend the gospel shudder with a holy fear (Isa. 66:5):

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! (Gal. 1:6–9)*

Third, the apologist needs a solid general theology and a particular theology of apologetics.<sup>13</sup> We need more than proof texts; rather, we need a logically integrated knowledge of what the Bible teaches on all major doctrines, especially since so many cults and new religions distort the Bible to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16; Matt. 22:29).<sup>14</sup> As Walter Martin warned, we need to overcome “the language barrier” with cultists, since they use Christian language robbed of the biblical meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, an apologist is ill equipped without a sound knowledge of basic logic and logical fallacies. God says through Isaiah, “Come let us reason together, says the Lord” (Isa. 1:18). Paul defended his preaching before Festus by saying, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” “What I am saying is true and reasonable” (Acts 26:25). Paul speaks of refuting “arguments raised up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:3–5). Bad arguments are driven out by good arguments, and good arguments demand logical and factual competence.<sup>16</sup> Sadly, few study the discipline of logic today; but unbelievers will often recognize both fallacies and good arguments when they are winsomely presented. As a philosopher, I may be partial, but it is *usually* evangelicals with philosophical training that make the best apologists.<sup>17</sup>

Fifth, the savvy apologist should develop an informed assessment of the worldviews and cultural influences of the culture to which one ministers. Apologetic arguments need to address questions and objections that are raised today. There are perennial features to a good apologetic (such as the defense of Scripture and arguments for the existence of God and the deity of Christ), but astute defenders of the faith will sniff out the kinds of unbelief active in their day. To honor God and reach people for Christ, we must know ourselves, know the Bible, and know our context. In the Hebrew Bible, we hear of the tribe of “Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what

Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32). In Acts, Paul declares that King "David had served God's purpose in his own generation" (13:36). To this end, the apologist should read widely, think deeply, and speak often to unbelievers (Col. 4:2-3).

Sixth, God's apologetic servant must be above reproach concerning the use of sources in speaking and writing. If apologetic arguments are closely associated with a particular apologist, this should be mentioned. For example, one should not give the kalam cosmological argument without reference to William Lane Craig, since he has done more to promote this argument than any other living philosopher.<sup>18</sup> Winning turns of phrase or humorous stories should be correctly attributed as well. Just as stealing sermons is a sin, so is stealing apologetics (Exod. 20:15).

The deep principle behind these six principles is diligence in study for the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. As Paul told Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15; see also Mal. 2:7-8). In a culture of digitized distractions galore, serious study has to be carved out with care and diligence.<sup>19</sup> One needs protracted times of silence and solitude for reading serious books and articles. There is no shortcut to intellectual competence. This, too, is part of the cross of self-denial (Luke 9:23). You cannot multitask apologetics. Our attitude should be that of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes: "Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true" (Eccl. 12:9-10; see 1:17; 8:9, 16).

The Gospel writer Luke showed the same concern in writing and research: "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4; John 21:24).

Apologetics makes demands on the whole apologist. Apologetics without character is arrogant; character without apologetics is hollow. This sacred and urgent task cannot be achieved apart from depending on the Spirit of Truth (John 15:5; Acts 1:8; John 14:26). I exhort all apologists (myself first) to heed this call and do exploits for the kingdom of God (Dan. 11:32 KJV).

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## NOTES

- 1 See Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
- 2 See Nigel Cameron, *The New Medicine: Life and Death after Hippocrates* (Chicago and London: Bioethics Press, 2002).
- 3 See Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1979).

- 4 See Scott Rae, *Moral Choices*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).
- 5 See Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, 30th anniv. ed. (1971; Wheaton: Tyndale, 2001), 72.
- 6 On calling, see Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).
- 7 On giving, see 2 Corinthians 8–9. For an exposition of these texts, see J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).
- 8 See J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1947); F. F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- 9 See A. W. Tozer, "The Use and Abuse of Humor," *The Best of A. W. Tozer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978). See also D. Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975).
- 10 See Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: The Lost Virtue* (New York: Touchstone, 2000); Douglas Groothuis, "Let's Rediscover Modesty," *Moody* (January–February, 2001), 34.
- 11 See Douglas Groothuis, "Understanding Social Media," *Christian Research Journal* 33,3 (2010), available online at <http://www.equip.org/articles/understanding-social-media/>.
- 12 A helpful resource is *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2012).
- 13 Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest have written a systematic theology that addresses apologetics in depth. See *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). See also Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011). On the biblical basis for apologetics and apologetic method, see Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, chaps. 2 and 3.
- 14 See James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: Twenty Ways Cults Misinterpret the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).
- 15 Walter Martin, "Scaling the Language Barrier," *The Kingdom of the Cults*, revised and updated (1966; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).
- 16 A primer on logic is Anthony Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments* (Chicago: Hackett, 2008). For a more advanced treatment, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "Argumentation and Logic," *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
- 17 Consider William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, Paul Copan, William Dembski, Gordon Lewis, Norman Geisler, Carl Henry, and many others. There are also evangelicals with doctorates in philosophy who attack apologetics, such as Myron Penner, *The End of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013).
- 18 See "The Existence of God (1)," William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008).
- 19 About the Internet, see Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); Tim Challies, *The Next Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).