

EVERY BELIEVER CONFIDENT

Apologetics for the
Ordinary Christian

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PREFACE

“What, are you some kind of religious nut?”

The woman sitting next to me in the coffee shop was responding to my offer to pray for her. Karen had sat down next to me ten minutes before and sighed so loudly for the entirety of those ten minutes that I finally realized she wanted to talk. I put my book down and asked her how her day was going. She recounted her frustration with the insurance company that wouldn’t cover her medical expenses. My offer to pray for her was met with a measured disdain.

“No, not a nut—but I am a Christian, and I believe that God answers prayer. Can I ask what your religious background is?”

“I am an atheist,” Karen said rather abruptly.

“Oh,” I replied, “you don’t believe God exists?”

She thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, I don’t know if God exists or not.”

“So you’re an agnostic.”

“Yes, that is what I am,” Karen said more confidently. Then she furrowed her brow. “Actually, I kind of believe that God is everywhere and in everything in the world.”

“So you’re a pantheist,” I offered.

“Yes,” she said triumphantly, “I am a pantheist!” She looked relieved to have worked through her belief system and articulated

it more clearly. She seemed thankful that I had helped her to arrive at clarity.

“What makes you believe that God is everywhere and in everything?” I continued.

The brow furrowed again, and she answered, “That’s a good question. I don’t really know!”

Thus began a conversation that lasted more than two hours. All I did for most of that time was to ask questions that forced Karen to examine the basis for her beliefs while also weaving the Christian gospel into the conversation.

About fifteen minutes into the conversation, a man came over with a cup of coffee and sat down next to her. He joined the discussion and began raising some objections to the Christian worldview I was presenting to Karen.

After a while I stopped and asked them, “Are you together?”

Karen looked at Bill and said, “No, I don’t know who he is.”

“No, I don’t know her,” Bill said, “but I heard your conversation and wanted to hear what you were saying and ask my own questions.”

Bill had grown up in a cult, he told me, and had rejected the Christian faith as a result, without realizing that what he was rejecting was not Christianity at all. As I questioned their beliefs and pressed them on the implications of their worldviews, their confidence began to crumble. They began to realize that much of what they believed was unsupportable and contradictory. The objections they raised against the Christian faith were mostly misunderstandings of what the Bible actually teaches.

After more than two hours, Bill stood to leave and said to me, “I don’t even know what I believe anymore. You took away everything I trusted. How can anyone know anything?” His entire system of unbelief had been dismantled by the questions

I was asking him and the good news of Jesus I was presenting as a contrast.

As our conversation neared its end, I presented the gospel clearly and challenged them to read the book of John. They both agreed to do so and went their separate ways. I fervently prayed that they would be ready to repent and believe in Christ right then and there, but they obviously weren't ready quite yet. It was clear, however, that neither of them had confidence anymore in what they had believed just a few hours before.

I, for my part, had never felt as much confidence in my faith as I experienced at that moment. I was literally shaking with excitement for the last hour of our conversation as I saw the power of the Christian faith to dismantle Bill's and Karen's previously confident worldviews. I had just begun studying apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary a few months before and was intensely interested in discovering whether what I was learning truly worked in encounters with unbelievers.

And it did! The power of the approach I was learning rendered the unbelief of my conversation partners weak and ineffective. It allowed me to winsomely present the gospel to them in a way that was powerful and convincing. It was the start of a new commitment I made to reach lost people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I have done so countless times in the twenty years since that day.

MY STORY

I was not born into a Christian home, but when I was seven years old my mother came to Christ after a long search for the truth. Her transformation was radical, and it deeply impacted my life. Mrs. Pepper led me to Christ when I, at age nine, attended

Vacation Bible School at Nepaug Congregational Church. When I was in fifth grade, my parents put my sisters and me in Christian school. By ninth grade, I was involved in SWAT—Soul-Winning Active Teens. I was trained to evangelize on the streets of upscale West Hartford, mostly by handing out tracts and asking people to read them. It was my earliest experience of trying to share the gospel with the lost.

At the same time, however, my conservative school and church instilled within me a fear of unbelievers. Whether they intended this or not, I began to believe that I should not have relationships with non-Christians unless I was actively seeking to evangelize them. My friendships with neighborhood pals faded, and I began to avoid anyone I didn't know outside my Christian bubble unless I had a gospel tract handy. I remained active in evangelism but found it frustrating and ineffective. I began to wonder how I would answer certain questions. I had been trained primarily to reach liberal Protestants and Catholics who already believed in God and the Bible but who placed their confidence in good works rather than in the free gift of the gospel.

As the years passed and I studied at Bible college and seminary, I still occasionally attempted to evangelize—but always expected to receive little or no response to each gospel tract I offered. The problem was not the gospel tract (usually) but the fact that I had never been taught how to engage unbelievers in conversation. I did not know how to tell people that I was a Christian without a sense of embarrassment (would they think I was a religious fanatic?) and fear that they would ask me a question I could not answer.

When I became a pastor in 1995 in New London, Connecticut, I was determined to be the evangelist I had always desired to be. I hoped that by becoming a pastor I would somehow

suddenly be endowed with a supernatural ability to effectively engage unbelievers with the gospel. My young family moved into the parsonage on Blydenburg Avenue, and I discovered almost immediately that my next-door neighbor was a college professor and a leading expert on Søren Kierkegaard. My determination to witness to my neighbors within the first month deflated like a leaky balloon. Instead, my determination to avoid my intellectual neighbor grew.

Looking back now, I can see that I was terrified of being asked a question I couldn't answer or encountering a belief system about which I knew little. I knew (so I thought) that I could engage Catholics and liberal Protestants, but the thought of dealing with a skeptic or someone from another religion was too scary for me to consider.

I began to read Josh McDowell and other apologists and would travel to apologetics conferences whenever they were within 150 miles of my church. These resources helped me immensely to further learn the facts of Christianity and the teachings of other belief systems, but I still struggled to know how to talk with people I met. I was growing in my knowledge but didn't know how to use that knowledge in real conversations.

I still had so many questions that I couldn't articulate. I wasn't sure that the Christian faith could answer every objection that was raised against it. I didn't know what to say if someone asked me to prove God's existence. I was confused about how to prove the claims of the Christian faith. Later I would come to understand that I was wrestling with foundational questions of epistemology (how we know what we know) and metaphysics (the nature of God and reality). These are the most fundamental questions of life and experience—something that philosophers and theologians have contemplated for thousands of years.

It wasn't until a few years later that my questions would be answered. By that time, I had completed a postgraduate degree in New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, left the pastorate, and started teaching systematic theology at a small seminary in the Philadelphia suburbs. I began to look for a doctoral program in the area and settled on Westminster Theological Seminary. I initially pursued a degree in New Testament, but I sensed God was steering me away from that field. I decided to audit a master's-level class in apologetics.

Since I'd had an interest in apologetics for a few years, I thought the class might fill in some gaps in my knowledge. By the second week of class, lights began to come on in my brain. By the fourth week, my foundational questions were being answered left and right. By the sixth week, I decided to change my doctoral focus to apologetics and never looked back. After I'd completed my first semester of doctoral studies in apologetics, I knew I had found my purpose in life. What I was learning was so thrilling, so soul-satisfying, that I would lie awake at night after class, feeling energized by the eternal truths I had learned that day. I struggled to fall asleep as I mulled over the glorious answers to the questions of humanity and my own heart. I wanted to jump out of bed and shout "Hallelujah!" for the wisdom and glory and light that our Savior, Jesus Christ, brings to us.

This thrill has never left me. Even today as I write this, I marvel at the gospel's ability to silence the so-called wisdom of our day, solve the world's problems, provide meaning and purpose, and reconcile individuals to God (see 1 Cor. 1:18–21). I have seen the emptiness of the "answers" offered by skeptics and religious leaders alike, and I have found true wisdom in the good news of Jesus. I continue to be delighted and amazed at

the way the risen Christ answers all the questions of humanity and all the puzzles of philosophy. My hope is that this book will help you to experience this same thrill.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Nowadays, Christians who are interested in apologetics no longer struggle to find good books to read—their challenge is to find books that are written at their level of interest and education. Many of the hundreds of resources now available require or assume a fair amount of familiarity with philosophy or science. These are valuable, and they deepen our efforts to reach unbelievers who stumble over philosophical and scientific objections. Nevertheless, most Christians do not learn philosophy or science. They do not have the time, money, interest, or ability to pursue a degree in one of these areas. They are not pastors, professors, or scholars. They simply want to reach their unbelieving neighbors, friends, coworkers, family members, and classmates.

You may be this kind of person. You may have a burden for the lost and may desire to learn to defend your faith but can't see yourself becoming a philosopher or scientist to do so. I have good news. You don't have to!

Being a good evangelist or apologist does not require you to obtain an academic degree or read obscure texts. Jesus never commanded his disciples to go to Athens to learn at the feet of philosophers in order to reach the world. While knowing a little about philosophy, science, and other fields of study may help, extensive knowledge in these areas is not necessary. Ordinary Christians can become skilled and effective evangelists without becoming students of philosophy. Ordinary Christians can learn

to defend the Christian faith, share the gospel, shake the unbelief of non-Christians, present the Christian worldview, and lead people to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

That is what this book is all about: equipping ordinary Christians with the confidence and skills they need to fulfill the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:19–20), give an answer to those who question them (see 1 Peter 3:15–16), and declare the mystery of Christ (see Col. 4:3–4). If you consider yourself to be an ordinary Christian, this book is for you!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. As you read my encounter with Karen and Bill in the coffee shop, what are your thoughts? Would you have handled the conversation differently? Did my method of apologetics in that situation give you ideas about how you might engage unbelievers with the gospel?
2. What was your first training for evangelism like? Describe the techniques and tools you were given to engage unbelievers with the gospel. Was that training effective at the time? Is it effective now?
3. What experience have you had with apologetics? What do you know about it?
4. How confident are you that you could answer objections to the Christian faith?
5. What objections to the faith are the most challenging for you to answer? What question are you most afraid unbelievers will ask you if you try to engage them with the gospel?

1

UNDERSTANDING APOLOGETICS

The term *apologetics* is only rarely heard in Christian churches. Despite the widespread popularity of apologists such as C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer in the 1960s and '70s, and Josh McDowell in the '80s and '90s, many evangelical Christians in the United States are still unfamiliar with the discipline of apologetics. I regularly meet Christians who have no idea what the word means.

What is worse is that they are also unfamiliar with the concept of being prepared to give an answer to those who challenge their Christian commitments. They do not know how to defend their faith or share it effectively. Many believers live with a quiet fear regarding challenges to the Christian faith. They hold firmly to the Bible but don't want to have to think hard about *why* they believe it. As a result, many Christians avoid conversations with non-Christians about anything spiritual, since they have no confidence that they could provide answers if asked.

Yet all Christians are commanded to think about our faith and know it well enough to defend it. First Peter 3:15–16 calls us to prepare ourselves to give an answer, or defense, when our faith is challenged. This is a significant part of evangelism, since unbelievers rarely encounter a presentation of the gospel without raising some objections. Additionally, this duty is for every Christian—not just for pastors or scholars. This is the missing element within many churches’ evangelism strategies. The average church member feels ill-equipped to know what to say when confronted with any of the myriad attacks on the faith.

We now live in a time that is rich with apologetics resources. Since the 1990s, we have seen an explosion of good books, websites, videos, and podcasts that help Christians to defend the faith in an increasingly hostile world. The advent of free online video has made available thousands of debates and lectures on apologetics. This is an incredible blessing to the body of Christ. Christians have more resources to help them now than at any other time in human history.

Yet because many apologetics materials are geared for those who have an academic bent, they are of only limited value for ordinary Christians. Too much philosophical language, or too much theory without practical application, reduces the effectiveness of these tools.

The purpose of this book is to help you to know, appreciate, firmly grasp, proclaim, and defend the Christian faith. My ultimate goal is to strengthen your faith, so you can confidently and effectively persuade unbelievers to believe in Jesus Christ. While some of the book’s lessons will dip into philosophy, science, logic, and other disciplines, its discussion will be kept at an accessible level so that you can easily grasp and practice its principles. My ultimate goal is to help you to lead souls to Christ.

DEFINITIONS

First Peter 3:15 tells us that all Christians are to be prepared to “give an answer” (NIV) or “make a defense” when their faith is challenged. Apologetics thus concerns the defense of the Christian faith against all forms of unbelief. The word *apologetics* comes from *apologia*, which the Greek version of this passage uses in verse 15. This is a legal term referring to a defense that is made against an accusation in a court of law.

One Greek lexicon defines it as “to speak on behalf of oneself or of others against accusations presumed to be false.”¹ It has the implication of defending against charges or giving an answer to those who accuse falsely. Peter is telling us that when the Christian faith is falsely accused—when someone says, “The Bible has errors” or “Jesus never rose from the dead”—we are to give an answer that shows the accusation to be false.

Cornelius Van Til, professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in the twentieth century and pioneer in that field, defined *apologetics* simply as “the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.”² This definition shows that apologetics must include every kind of objection that may be raised up against the truth of Christianity.

A more recent definition of apologetics indicates the importance of showing the rationality and beauty of the Christian faith. William Edgar defines it as “the art of persuasion, the discipline

1. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, *Introduction & Domains* (United Bible Societies, 1988), 33.435.

2. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (P&R Publishing, 2003), 17.

which considers ways to commend and defend the living God to those without faith.”³ The goal of defending the faith is to persuade unbelievers that Jesus is the Messiah and that they are in need of salvation. While we defend the faith, however, we ought also to be *commending* it—that is, showing how the gospel answers the deepest needs of the human condition and makes sense of the world.

Now that we have defined apologetics, let’s look into the Scriptures and see what they have to say about the act of defending the faith.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN APOLOGETICS AND EVANGELISM

The goal of evangelism is to lead others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The goal of apologetics should be the same. So what is the difference between the two? In summary, apologetics is a distinct but inseparable part of evangelism.

Evangelism is concerned with our presentation of the gospel and with the methods we use for doing so. Apologetics is concerned with answering objections to the gospel, clearing away intellectual obstacles, and commending the Christian faith as the only legitimate answer to man’s predicament.

Think of an all-wheel drive car. Usually its front tires do most of the work, but when it needs more power or speed, its rear wheels kick into gear. When you are proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, you are evangelizing. However, when

3. William Edgar, “Christian Apologetics for a New Century,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, ed. W. C. Campbell-Jack and Gavin McGrath with C. Stephen Evans (InterVarsity Press, 2006), 3.

someone raises questions about or objections to the Christian faith, apologetics is what you use to answer these challenges so that you can return to evangelizing.

Apologetics is also just as important for Christians as it is for unbelievers. It is not only an aid to evangelism. It is also critical for strengthening the faith of believers, grounding them more deeply in doctrine, and answering their doubts. The result of apologetics is the church's increased confidence in the truth, power, and reliability of the gospel, the Scriptures, and the body of Christian doctrine that comprises our faith. A lack of knowledge of apologetics is the primary reason many churches have ceased to be effective in their evangelistic efforts. If Christians doubt their own faith, or don't know it very well, they are unlikely to share it well with others.

Apologetics and evangelism, though distinct, are thus inseparable. Evangelism without apologetics limits itself to a monologue with unbelievers. Apologetics without evangelism often becomes merely an intellectual exercise in which believers assure themselves that they are right without ever engaging others to see if their ideas can withstand scrutiny. Apologetics and evangelism are designed to be complementary. To simply talk to unbelievers until they interrupt you or end the conversation is not biblical evangelism. Evangelism should be a dialogue in which you take the time to understand a person's worldview and reasons for not believing in Christ and then present arguments for the truth of Christianity. By keeping the focus of apologetics on winning the lost to salvation (and not something short of that, like merely "proving God exists"), we keep it in its rightful place as a partner to evangelism.

APPROACHES TO APOLOGETICS

A discussion of the goal of apologetics leads to a discussion of various apologetic approaches. There are several different types, and each contributes in different ways to the defense of the Christian faith.

Evidentialism

The most well-known approach to apologetics is evidentialism, which seeks to develop and counter challenges to the Christian faith with detailed facts from a number of disciplines—primarily history and science. For example, when the historical reliability of the Gospels is challenged, evidential apologists seek to establish the reports of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John by studying the details of the Greek text, historical events, cultural practices, geography, archaeology, interaction with Roman history, and more. This tends to produce a rich and vast body of material that strengthens the case for the truth of Christianity.

How we understand the concept of *evidence* is important to this approach. Some people mistakenly believe we can “prove” the Christian faith by presenting historical, cultural, and archaeological facts. They believe that if we present enough evidence, or the right kinds of evidence, then unbelievers *must* believe the Christian faith. They hope that skeptics will be *compelled* to believe in Christ and will have no ability to resist the truth. While it is true that some Christians describe their conversions this way, their testimonies are experiential descriptions of how they felt at the moment that they realized the truth of the gospel. In reality, as we will see later, such an experience comes at the end of a process through which the Holy Spirit convicts them of sin and draws them to Christ. God uses evidences as part of

that process, but it is not the presentation of evidences alone that compels them to believe.

So, rather than provide irresistible and compelling proof, evidences supplement the good news of Jesus Christ as it works on human hearts. When individuals see all the historical, scientific, and philosophical truth that corroborates the message of the gospel, those evidences can confirm the truth in their hearts. This is the value of evidence. Well-known advocates of evidentialism include Lee Strobel, Sean McDowell, and J. Warner Wallace.

Classical Apologetics

Classical apologetics establishes arguments for the existence of God primarily from philosophy and logic. It often does not appeal to or reference Scripture; rather, the classical apologist seeks to appeal only to sources with which many unbelievers can agree—such as reason, philosophy, science, and logic. This is a two-step approach that begins with an attempt to establish the existence of God without reference to the Bible, and then moves on to the reliability of the Bible, the authenticity of miracles, the truth of the resurrection, and more. Representatives of this approach include Norman Geisler, William Lane Craig, Douglas Groothuis, and R.C. Sproul.

Cumulative Case Apologetics

Also known as “best explanation” apologetics, cumulative case apologetics (CCA) seeks to present a case for the Christian faith by taking all the lines of evidence from evidentialism and combining them to show that Christianity makes better sense of life in this world than other worldviews. CCA seeks to present the Christian faith not as the *only* way to answer the questions of the human condition but merely as the *best* way. What we mean

by “the human condition” includes the place of human beings in the universe, the nature of right and wrong, the question of free will, the brokenness of the world, and the universal human desire for purpose.

One well-known example of CCA is the work of C. S. Lewis (although he employed other approaches as well). Lewis often piled up various arguments to make the case that Christianity best described reality. CCA highlights the explanatory power of the Christian faith to answer questions such as how there can be so much evil in the world but also so much good. Every worldview has to be able to account for that, and advocates of CCA make compelling arguments that the Christian faith is the best explanation.

Minimal Facts Apologetics

Minimal facts apologetics (MFA) surveys the conclusions of a wide variety of experts and summarizes the basic facts upon which all or most in their discipline agree. MFA then uses this agreement as a base on which to build further arguments for the truth of Christianity. For example, proponents of MFA approach the death and resurrection of Jesus with the fact that, first, almost no historian doubts the existence of Jesus. This includes both Christian and non-Christian scholars. In addition, almost no historian doubts that Jesus was crucified by the Romans under the rule of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. Further, a strong majority of historians believe that Jesus’s tomb was empty after three days.

MFA proceeds to argue that if everyone can agree on these facts, then by using the usual historical criteria we can rationally believe that the entire story of Jesus is true. This includes his resurrection and his claims of being God incarnate and the Savior of the world. MFA essentially rides the scholarly consensus as

far as it will go and then shows that it ought to go farther and accept the Bible's teaching completely. Gary Habermas takes this approach.

Each of these approaches has yielded powerful arguments for the Christian faith. The fruit of their research can be found in hundreds of original works that have strengthened our confidence in the truth of Scripture. As apologetic *methods*, however, they are insufficient. On their own they lack a strategy for effectively engaging unbelievers in the kind of gospel conversations that confront them with the gospel's demands that they repent and believe. They state facts, but they fail to acknowledge the rebellious hearts of those who do not believe. Although they contribute great evidences that strengthen the case for the Christian faith, they start with an insufficient theological basis.

Those who advocate evidentialist approaches sometimes assume that logic and rationality are universally agreed on (they are not) and imply that unbelievers will automatically accept the truth if it is clearly shown to them. Yet if the biblical description of unsaved hearts and minds is true, no one genuinely seeks God (see Rom. 3: 11) unless God draws them (see John 6:44). A biblical understanding of conversion must therefore begin with God drawing sinners and making the gospel clear to them.

A few years ago, I was talking with a leader of a well-known apologetics ministry that works from a classical approach. In order to clarify for both of us the difference between our approaches, I asked him how he goes about talking with unbelievers.

"I approach the person and ask him, 'If I can prove to you that God exists, will you believe in him?'" he said.

"What if the person says no?" I asked.

"Then I move on to someone else."

I was flabbergasted. Given the Bible's description of unbelievers' state of rebellion against God, opposition to the truth, and intellectual darkness, I don't expect my conversations with them to be so formulaic. I am skeptical that "proving" that God exists will convince most people. I used to try to do so in my evangelism efforts, using logic and philosophy, and encountered more objections than I could handle without a degree in philosophy. I have also seen skeptics flat-out refuse any argument or evidence as insufficient, no matter how coherently its case is presented.

I was also surprised that this apologist's tactic was so uniform. Not everyone is wrestling with the existence of God, and even for those who are, this may not be the most pressing issue contributing to their unbelief. Rather than addressing all unbelievers in the same way, we can follow an approach that is more responsive to individuals and their particular reasons for nonbelief.

Presuppositionalism

The term *presuppositional* is derived from the word *presupposition*, which refers to a basic heart commitment or a precondition for knowledge. The idea is that some people unconsciously assume certain things to be true that they cannot prove logically but nonetheless *want* to be true. While some presuppositionalists prefer other names for their approach, such as *covenantal* or *transcendental*,⁴ the name *presuppositional* is the most widely used.⁵

4. See K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Crossway, 2013), 38–39, for an explanation of the history of the term *presuppositional* and of his preference for the label *covenantal*.

5. Unfortunately, as New Testament scholar Darrell Bock mentioned once in a lecture I attended, some people use this term to describe an approach that answers every objection with "The Bible tells me so." Such an inadequate approach is more properly called *fideism*, which rejects the idea that we need to give any rational justification for our beliefs. Fideism contradicts 1 Peter

A presuppositional approach gets to the heart of unbelievers' objections to Christianity in order to reveal their contradiction, irrationality, and unlivability before presenting the truth of the Christian faith in all its glory and true rationality.

A presupposition is a belief that serves as a foundation for all other beliefs. The triune God and his revelation serve as Christians' foundational beliefs. Unbelievers often have never considered what their most basic heart commitment is, and therefore their foundational beliefs go unexamined. For example, they often believe that certain actions are right and good and that other actions are wrong or evil. When pressed to say *why* certain actions are good or evil, they often cannot provide an answer.

Presuppositions, therefore, are very important, and everyone has them. The presuppositional approach to apologetics begins with biblical truth and seeks to get at the heart of unbelievers' rejection of the gospel. What follows are some of the basic tenets of presuppositionalism.

First, God has revealed himself, and therefore every person knows him (see Rom. 1:18–21). While evidentialists say that all people have the *capacity* to know God, presuppositionalists say, with Romans 1, that all people do indeed know God. Believers know God in a relationship of grace, and unbelievers know God in a relationship of wrath. Unbelief is personal. Because unbelievers know God, they are without excuse. When you share the truth of the Christian faith with unbelievers, you are speaking of a God whom they already know—even though they are suppressing that knowledge. We will explore this further in chapter 4.

3:15–16's clear command for us to be prepared to give an answer to those who ask us for the reasons for our faith. God's revelation in the Bible is the foundation for everything we know, but we are called to do more than simply quote Bible verses.

Second, the Bible attests to its own authority. Because there is no authority higher than God, his Word is the highest court of appeals for any question of truth. We call this the *self-attesting authority of Scripture*. Most other systems of belief place reason in the position of highest authority or test of truth. While reason is a God-given capacity, it is not an authority. Rather, reason is a tool we use to know and understand the truth. Reason helps us to clarify our beliefs and avoid contradiction in our theology, but it does not stand over Scripture as a judge of what is “reasonable.”

Only the Christian worldview can adequately explain all aspects of the human experience in a way that is rational, non-contradictory, and meaningful. The reason is that this is God’s world, and his explanation of our origin, purpose, and destiny, and of what is wrong with this world, is the only one that works. Non-Christian worldviews and belief systems face the challenge of trying to explain God’s world on their own distorted terms and must necessarily be wrong in important ways, because only God describes this world correctly. Because they do not accept the authority of Scripture, they oppose Christianity with their partial truths.

This book lays out a basic and practical presuppositional approach to apologetics. It does not deny the importance of evidence but begins with Christian presuppositions. When this approach encounters unbelief of any kind, it challenges unbelievers’ presuppositions and shows that they cannot rationally explain life and existence. It brings evidences into the conversation *after* acknowledging unbelievers’ presuppositions. By establishing a person’s presuppositions first, you force them to accept their logical implications. This prevents them from denying the evidences you offer later in the discussion, because if they have already

agreed about what makes an idea rational or historical, denying the implications would cause them to be irrational.

For example, some who reject Christianity do so because they do not believe there is adequate historical support for the Gospels' records of Jesus's life and ministry. Unless you begin by establishing how we know anything that happened in the past, an unbeliever can deny that the Bible's historical record is accurate. However, if both of you agree that knowledge of the past is possible, and that we must depend on carefully recorded and preserved eyewitness accounts from reliable individuals in order to know the past, then it is relatively easy to demonstrate that the Gospels are trustworthy. If the unbeliever tries to deny this after you have both established the way in which history works, they show themselves to be self-contradictory by rejecting documents that meet the standard you have both agreed on for reliable history.

Such a conversation may look like this:

Christian: Can I tell you about Jesus and why he came to save us?

Skeptic: Save your breath. I don't believe that we can really know who Jesus was or what he said.

Christian: Really? Why not?

Skeptic: Because the Bible was written so long ago that we can't expect its original message to have survived. As a result, we don't even know if Jesus existed or if anything written about him is true.

Christian: Do you believe we can know the truth about anything in the past? Or can we believe only what we see in the present?

Skeptic: Of course we can believe in the past! We have pictures and records of people and events. We can know some things that happened.

Christian: But surely some of what people claim happened in the past is unreliable, like the story of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. How do historians know whether an account is true or not?

Skeptic: I suppose it comes down to reliable testimony, artifacts, archaeology, written records, and things like that. When they corroborate written accounts, we can believe those accounts really happened.

Christian: Yes! We have to trust written accounts if they demonstrate careful reporting and are confirmed by other known historical facts. What do you find lacking in the gospel accounts of Jesus?

Skeptic: Well, I don't know specifics because I've never read the Bible, but didn't his followers write the Gospels? How can we believe they weren't exaggerating or making up miracles? They believed in Jesus, so their testimony doesn't count.

Christian: Everyone who writes a biography about another person believes that person existed, because otherwise they wouldn't write the story, so that can't count against the gospel writers. In addition, they were careful to question eye-witnesses and to research and report known facts. Look at Luke's gospel. It begins with Luke telling his readers that he carefully researched all the facts in the book. That sounds like a reliable testimony to me. It was clearly not a book full of legends and made-up stories. Hundreds of facts that

are mentioned in the Gospels have been verified by history, geography, archaeology, and other fields. I would think they would qualify as being reliable as much as any other ancient account does.

Skeptic: I didn't know that. I thought the New Testament was full of mythical accounts of Jesus that couldn't be verified in any way.

Christian: Let me encourage you to read the Gospels to see who Jesus really is and what he said about himself.

While this imaginary conversation is simplistic, it demonstrates your need to expose the presuppositions of your conversation partner before you present them with evidence for the Christian faith. We want to be sure to establish standards for what is rational, historical, and ethical before we argue that the Christian faith meets those standards. Once we do this, unbelievers have a choice between accepting the truth of Christianity or being irrational. This approach will be explained in greater detail throughout this book, so if this concept still seems unclear to you, be patient and read on.

CONCLUSION

In the next few chapters, we will unpack the main ideas behind the presuppositional approach, explain them in detail, and show how they work in real-life apologetic encounters. Those chapters come at apologetics from several different angles, helping us to think through worldviews, logic, theology, evangelism, and world religions. The full picture will come together at the end of the book. It is important to be patient with the process.

Learning apologetics is very much like learning a language: you start slowly with basics and move into the language's more complicated aspects. Throughout the entire process, you must master elements of the language that you won't fully put into use until you become conversant in it.

In the same way, becoming well-trained apologists requires us to master certain theological concepts and philosophical ideas that kick into gear when the time is right. The key is for us to retrain our minds to think in a distinctly Christian fashion. This constitutes a major shift for many of us, because we often don't realize how secular or pagan our thinking has become. We have lost confidence in the Word of God because of the relentless cultural and intellectual assaults that come against our faith from all corners.

When we take a step back, however, and immerse ourselves again in the Scriptures, we find our confidence restored and our strength renewed. We also find that we are holding a number of assumptions and ideologies that we must shake off to reinstate a Christian mind. We need to constantly renew our minds so that they are transformed (see Rom. 12:2). The way we do this is by beholding the glory of the Lord in his Word (see 2 Cor. 3:18). When we develop a thoroughly Christian mind, defending the faith becomes more natural and powerful.

In the next chapter, we will look at the biblical warrant for apologetics. From Genesis to Revelation, God defends his glory from assaults by Satan and by those who follow him. In every case, God rises to defend his glory and, in the process, ensures that the good news of his saving power is heard.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. William Edgar defines apologetics as “the art of persuasion.” Does apologetics take on a new meaning for you if you see its end goal as persuading others rather than trying to defeat them in a debate or shut them up? How so?
2. Explain the problem with the concepts of “evidence” and “proof” as they are usually understood within apologetics.
3. Although all the various approaches to apologetics that we defined have great value, what makes most of them problematic as methods for engaging unbelievers with the gospel?
4. Did you find the sample conversation on pages 27–29 helpful for understanding presuppositionalism? Why or why not?

CASE STUDY

You take a new job at a thriving company. Most of your new coworkers are bright and motivated. After two weeks on the job, however, you notice that no one you have met has mentioned God or religion, except for the Hindu accountant in the finance department. You start to wonder if talk about God is unwelcome in the office. One day, a coworker notices that you have a Bible verse on your phone’s lock screen.

“Why do you have that on your phone? Are you religious? If so, that would surprise me, because you seem like such a normal person. We have had religious people before in this office and it created a problem, so be warned. We are a welcoming office and don’t care for people who are narrow-minded and judgmental. Some of us believe in God but keep our faith to ourselves

because we don't want to offend anyone. Religion is best left to your private life, anyway. You're not going to cause problems for this company, are you? Listen, just learn to fit in and express your faith on your own time."

In such a scenario, what considerations would you take into account regarding the way you should respond to your coworker? What would you say to her, and why?