

Common Objections to the Task of Apologetics

Christians who are sceptical about the value of apologetics raise a number of different objections, some based on verses from the Bible and others based on limitations of logic and apologetics. These objections are generally based on misunderstandings of the Bible text or of the purpose of apologetics. In the list of objections that follows I am indebted to Norman Geisler [5] although I have made some changes to his list and have significantly modified his responses:

Objections from the Bible

1. The Bible does not need to be defended

Verses such as Hebrews 4:12 are quoted to support the claim that the Bible is powerful in itself since it is God's living word. It is sometimes said that the Bible is like a lion – it does not need to be defended but unleashed. It is true that Scripture is powerful to change attitudes and challenge hearts, but if someone will not read or listen seriously to it then it cannot do this work. Apologetics can establish the fact that it is reasonable to take the Bible seriously, so opening people to be prepared to listen. Furthermore, if Scripture only needed to be unleashed to do its work then the task of teaching and preaching would also be unnecessary and evangelism would be reduced to merely passing on texts from the Bible. Scripture consistently describes people as the medium through which God's truth is communicated to other people. The Bible, and the gospel which it declares, is powerful to change attitudes and lives, but it must be proclaimed, declared and explained for, *"How ... can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"* (Romans 10:14).

2. God cannot be known by human reason

1 Corinthians 1:21 says that the world did not know God through its wisdom. It is claimed that this means there is no point in trying to get people to accept rational arguments for God. The context of 1 Corinthians 1, however, is not the existence of God but the acceptance of the message of the cross. That message cannot be accepted by natural reason alone – it only makes sense because of the special revelation of Scripture and as the Spirit enlightens (1 Corinthians 2:14). Elsewhere, however, Paul writes of evidence in nature pointing to the existence of God and some of His attributes, leaving people without excuse (Romans 2:12-15).

3. Natural humanity cannot understand God's truth

1 Corinthians 2:14 says that *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things what come from the Spirit of God"*. It is argued that there is no point, therefore, in trying to explain them to him. Notice, however, that Paul says this man does not accept (Greek *dekomai*, 'welcome') them, not that he cannot understand them. Non-believers reject the gospel not because it is illogical and they cannot understand what it means but because they refuse to accept its claims over them. Apologetics seeks to explain the message clearly and rationally so that when the Spirit moves the person's heart they will be ready to accept the truth. In fact, a prayerful approach to apologetics recognises that the work of the Spirit is necessary for people to receive the truth. The apologist does not seek to obstruct or replace the Spirit but to be the Spirit's agent in bringing people to Christ.

4. Without faith one cannot please God

Hebrews 11:6 clearly states that faith is essential to please God, and some people suggest that this means that reason is displeasing to Him. This claim sets up a false division between faith and reason. Biblical faith is not blind belief in spite of the evidence, but trust in something that has been commended to the person as trustworthy. The gospel is a message from God that claims that He can be trusted, and apologetics provides evidence that supports that claim. Faith is a response on the part of the individual that accepts the claim (or, rather, accepts the one of whom it speaks) and places confidence in it (or, more correctly, in Him) rather than in self or any alternative.

5. Jesus refused to give signs to evil men

This claim arises from Matthew 12:39, where Jesus says that a wicked generation asks for signs. However, in the next verse Jesus says that one sign, the sign of Jonah, meaning His resurrection, would be given. Jesus presented His miracles as evidence of His identity as the Messiah and Son of God (Matthew 11:4-5; Mark 2:10-11; John 14:11). On occasions He refused to do miracles for entertainment (Luke 23:8) or because of unbelief (Matthew 13:58), but people saw his miracles and realised that they showed He came from God (John 3:2), and the apostles pointed to His miracles (Acts 2:22) and especially His resurrection (Acts 2:32; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:3ff.) as evidence of His identity. The proper lesson to learn from Jesus' example is not that apologetics is wrong, but that we need discernment to know when to engage in an argument and when not to.

6. Do not answer a fool according to his folly

Proverbs 26:5 is the basis for this claim, but those who make it neglect to read the following verse, which says that we should answer a fool according to his folly. The point of these adjacent and seemingly contradictory proverbs is that we need wisdom to decide when we should give an answer to a "fool" (someone who rejects God's existence, according to Psalm 14:1) and when we should not.

7. Apologetics is not used in the Bible

If this claim is meant to say that Scripture provides no examples of God providing evidence to support faith then it is simply wrong. Geisler points to the miracles of Moses (Exodus 4:1-9), Elijah (1 Kings 18) and Jesus (Acts 2:22) as well as the way in which Paul reasoned with people about God's existence, even using their own philosophical and religious ideas as a starting point (Acts 17:22-31). The Bible, therefore, provides clear precedents for the task of apologetics even if it does not contain the kind of detailed arguments necessary in modern apologetics since it was written in a pre-modern world primarily to believers. Apologetics today continues patterns found in Scripture.