

An Apology For Apologetics

One of the blessings associated with writing for the Baptist Times is the feedback I receive in response to articles. Over the years, I've gotten many gracious and complimentary letters for which I am grateful. On occasion, however, I find statements in those notes that set off alarms in my spirit. I'm thinking of two instances recently where an otherwise delightful word of encouragement was followed with something to the effect of, "Your article on such and such was good, but I don't need all that logic and apologetic evidence. I just accept it by faith." Exposure to such comments caused me to begin listening more carefully to the conversations of Christians. As a result, I've begun to notice a distinct philosophical presupposition held by many. That assumption could be summarized as follows – if one has true faith, one doesn't need reason. This is perhaps rooted in an even deeper assumption that faith is most perfectly expressed as trusting God *without* evidence. In essence, they consider blind faith a virtue. Now to be clear, I'm not suggesting that anyone *consciously* thinks this way, or that, if confronted with such a proposition, they would affirm it. Rather, I'm simply pointing out that the unguarded statements of many Christians betray this to be their actual position. Such a stance, however, is both misguided and dangerous. It is misguided because it is based on an unbiblical understanding of faith. It is dangerous because it neglects and ultimately drives away those that are struggling with doubts and sincere questions. Consider, for example, the recent Barna research showing that 59% of "Mosaics" (evangelical Christian young people aged 18-29) have dropped out of involvement in the church.¹ When researcher Larry Barnett drilled down into the reasons for such a widespread defection, he found that "unanswered questions and unresolved doubts fully accounted for Christianity's recent decline in the United States. Doubts and questions not only routinely led to departure from Christianity, but they also had a strong adverse impact on other facets of spiritual health including frequency of worship attendance, Bible reading, prayer, and so forth."² As Bible believers not to mention patriots who care deeply about the future of our country, we lament, pray about, and perhaps even weep over such a precipitous decline. Unfortunately, we frequently try to pin the blame for it on the morally bankrupt culture at large or the unrelenting attacks of the secular left. But if the data is accepted, that's not it. Rather, the fiery darts of the wicked are effective largely because our young people have been given no shield with which to protect themselves.

The stories could be multiplied *ad nauseam* about seemingly solidly Christian young people who left the faith after arriving on campus and getting confronted by a professor with a countervailing point of view who argued his point cogently with evidence and reason. Of course, I'm not suggesting that the evidence or reasons given by such professors are good, they don't have to be and that's the point. When Christian young people have been given *no* logical reason or sound evidence (i.e. an apologetic) to trust the resurrection, the historicity of creation, etc., any argument to the contrary seems compelling. Now at this point, many will insist that the Bible itself offers all the evidence they need. Such an assertion, however, inadvertently concedes the point that evidence is necessary but at the same time it fails to provide evidence for the reliability of the Bible. Again, some will claim that the Bible doesn't need defending and that no argument made on its behalf could ever add to its authority. In one sense this is true, but such reasoning fails to recognize that "apologetics is not about actual authority but about perceived authority. Apologetics is therefore appropriate when people have objections that prevent them from acknowledging the authority of Scripture."³ Of course, some will insist that those young people who abandon the faith were probably never truly saved in the first place. This objection, however, misses the point. Perhaps if evidence had been given them and a logical case for Christianity's veracity made to them before they left for college, they would have embraced the faith sincerely. I'm simply saying that faith needs to be rooted in evidence.

This brings me back to the assumption I spoke about earlier. Many Christians don't agree that faith needs reasons or that it must be grounded in evidence. To the contrary they think that faith can't have reason. After all, they say, if you could understand it, it wouldn't be faith. In my opinion, this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of faith. While it is true that Webster's dictionary defines faith as, "firm belief in something for which there is no *proof*"⁴ it does not follow that faith requires no *evidence*. Proof and evidence are not synonymous. "Believing in leprechauns is irrational precisely because there is no evidence for the existence of leprechauns. Believing in God, by contrast, is like believing in atoms. The process is exactly the same. You follow the evidence of what you *can* see to infer the existence of something you *cannot* see. The effect needs a cause adequate to explain it."⁵ Faith, in other words, is trusting in something you have good reason to believe is true. Biblical examples abound to support this understanding. "When John the Baptist was in prison and wondering whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, as John had previously proclaimed, Jesus didn't say to him, "Oh John, come on man! Don't you trust Me? Just have faith." Nothing even remotely like that is recorded. Instead, Jesus provided evidence of His identity as the Messiah. In no way did He rebuke John's questions but rather answered him by listing His unique credentials as the Messiah who supernaturally fulfilled prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Matthew 11:1-11).⁶ Again, in Paul's famous definition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 people commonly cut him off in mid-sentence; a careful reading of the text, however, shows that his explanation continues all the way to the end of v. 6. This is important for it means that there are "four components of the gospel listed (not three), each introduced by the same conjunction (ὅτι) in Greek."⁷ The message Paul delivered to the Corinthians, then, was that Jesus died, that He was buried, that He rose again, "*and that He was seen*" (*emphasis added*). Clearly, the apostle did not expect or want the people in Corinth to blindly accept the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Instead, he gave them good reason to believe it since there were hundreds of independent eyewitnesses to

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>

² <https://www.projectnextgen.org/our-research/key-findings/>

³ James K. Beilby, *Thinking about Christian Apologetics* : *What it is and Why we do It*: Downers Grove, Ill. : IVP Academic, c2011, 2011), 140.

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/faith>

⁵ Gregory Koukl, *Tactics : A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*: Grand Rapids, Mich. : Zondervan, c2009, 2009), 53.

⁶ Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 2011), 25-26.

⁷ Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*: Nashville, Tenn. : Broadman & Holman, ©2014, 2014), 369.

verify it. The same thing is true in Luke's Gospel. When the beloved physician wrote to Theophilus he prefaced his work as the eyewitness account of events. Why? The answer is simple: Luke, like Jesus and Paul, understood that faith is not merely belief in something – no matter how deep or sincere that belief might be. Rather it is trust in something you have *good reason* to believe is true. If so, however, it follows that if you don't have good reason to believe something is true, then your trust in it is not faith in any meaningful sense of the word. It is merely wishful thinking.

In sum, I don't want this article to be taken as a rebuke of those who simply accept the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. I assume that somewhere along the line they had what they considered to be compelling evidence to trust it as an accurate account of historical events. I do, however, want to insist that as America hurtles in an ever more pagan direction where larger and larger swaths of the population view the Bible with skepticism, the need for apologetics grows dramatically. Ours is not a blind faith and for the sake of the next generation we must not present it that way.