

Ready To Reason

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Is it Necessary?

A surge of pious agreement overcame me the first time I heard someone confidently assert that "The word of God no more needs defense than does a lion in a cage. Just let the lion loose, and it will take care of itself!" There seemed something very right about that sentiment. It almost appeared irreverent to disagree with it.

Well, something about that assertion is indeed right. God is certainly not in need of anything - much less the puny efforts of any particular man or woman to defend His word. He is the Creator of heaven and earth, almighty in power, and sovereign in controlling all things. The Apostle Paul, when reasoning with the Athenian philosophers, made that very point: he declared that God is not worshiped with men's hands "as though He needed any thing, seeing that He gives to all life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24). If God were ever to hunger, for instance, He would not need to tell us since the fullness of all creation is His (Ps. 50:12)! He depends upon nothing outside Himself, and everything outside of Him depends upon Him for its existence, qualities, abilities, accomplishments, and blessings. "In Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

So it is obvious that God does not need our inadequate reasoning and our feeble attempts to defend His word. Nevertheless, the pious-sounding remark with which we began is still mistaken. It suggests that we should not concern ourselves with efforts at apologetics^[1] because God will directly take care of such matters Himself. The remark is just as mistaken as saying that God does not need us as evangelists (He could even make the stones to cry out, couldn't He?) -- and therefore efforts at evangelistic witness are unimportant. Or, a person might misguidedly think that, because God has the power and ability to provide his family with food and clothing without "help from us," he does not need to go to work tomorrow.

Thinking like this is unbiblical. It confuses what God Himself needs from us and what God requires of us. It assumes that God ordains ends, but not means to those ends (or at least not the instrumentality of created means). There is no need for God to use our evangelistic witness, our daily work for a paycheck, or our defense of the faith -- but He chooses to do so, and He calls us to apply ourselves to them. The Bible directs us to work, although God *could* provide for our families in other ways. The Bible directs us to evangelize, even though God *could* use other means to call sinners to Himself. And the Bible also directs us to defend the faith -- not because God would be helpless without us, but because this is one of His ordained *means* of glorifying Himself and vindicating His truth.

Christ speaks to the church as a whole through Jude, commanding us to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). False and heretical teaching was threatening the church and its grasp of gospel truth. Jude very well knew that God was in sovereign control, and indeed that God would in time directly deal with wicked teachers, consigning them to everlasting condemnation. Still Jude *also* urged his readers themselves to contend with the error of false teaching, not sitting back and expecting that God would simply take care of it Himself.

Paul wrote to Titus that overseers (pastors and elders) in the church are required to be especially adept at refuting those who oppose the truth of God (Titus 1:9). However this is not merely the assigned task of ordained men. All believers are commanded to engage in it as well. Addressing himself to all members of the congregation, Peter penned the following command: "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to give an answer to anyone who asks from you a reason for the hope that is within you, yet with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). It is God Himself, speaking through Peter's inspired words, who calls upon us as believers -- each and every one of us -- to be prepared to defend the faith in the face of challenges and questions which come from unbelievers -- any one of them.

The necessity of apologetics is not a divine necessity: God can surely do His work without us. The necessity of apologetics is a moral necessity: God has chosen to do His work through us and called us to it. Apologetics is the special talent of some believers, and the interested hobby of others. But it is the God-ordained responsibility of all believers.

What It Isn't

We should look at 1 Peter 3:15 again and notice a few things that it does not say.

(1) It does not say that believers are supposed to take the initiative and start arrogant arguments with unbelievers, telling them that we have all the answers. We do not have to go out looking for a fight. We certainly should not sport or encourage a "I'll prove it to you" spirit, an attitude which relishes refutation. The text indicates that we offer a reasoned defense in answer to those who ask for such from us, whether they do so as an opening challenge to the integrity of God's word or as the natural response to our evangelistic witness.

The text also indicates that the spirit in which we offer our apologetic answer is one of "gentleness and respect." It is not pugnacious and defensive. It is not a spirit of intellectual one-up-manship. The task of apologetics begins with humility. After all, the fear of the Lord is the starting point of all knowledge (Prov. 1:7). Moreover, apologetics is pursued in service to the Lord, and "the Lord's servant must not strive, but be gentle toward all, apt to teach" (2 Tim. 2:24). Apologetics is not a place for vain flexing of our intellectual muscles.

(2) Another thing that 1 Peter 3:15 does not say is that believers are responsible to persuade anybody who challenges or questions their faith. We can offer sound reasons to the unbeliever, but we cannot make him or her subjectively believe those reasons. We can refute the poor argumentation of the unbeliever, but still not persuade them. We can close the mouth of the critic,

but only God can open the heart. It is not in our ability, and not our responsibility, to regenerate the dead heart and give sight to the blind eyes of unbelievers. That is God's gracious work.

It is God who must enlighten the eyes of one's understanding (Eph. 1:18). "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are Spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Until God in His sovereign grace changes the sinner from within, he will not see the kingdom of God or submit to the King. Jesus taught this to Nicodemus, reminding him that "the wind [same Greek word as "Spirit"] blows where it will... So is every one who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Our task is to present a faithful and sound witness and defense. The task of persuasion is God's. That is why apologists should not evaluate their success or adjust their message on the basis of whether the unbeliever finally comes to agree with them or not.

(3) Yet another thing that 1 Peter 3:15 does not say is that defending the faith has a different ultimate authority than does the task of expounding the faith. It is a common mistake among evangelicals to imagine that the authority of God and His word is the basis for their theology and preaching, but the authority for defending this faith must be something other than God and His word -- or else we would be begging the question raised by unbelievers. Accordingly, believers will sometimes be misled into thinking that whatever they take as the ultimate standard in apologetical thinking must be neutral and agreed upon by believer and unbeliever alike; and from here they go on to make the second mistake of thinking that something like "reason" is such a commonly understood and accepted standard.

These ideas are quite obviously out of accord with Biblical teaching, however. Does apologetics have a different epistemological^[2] authority than expounding theology? Our theology is founded upon the authority of Christ, speaking by His Spirit in the words of Scripture. 1 Peter 3:15 teaches us that the precondition of presenting a defense of the faith (apologetics) is *also* that we "sanctify [set apart] Christ as Lord in your hearts." It would be a mistake to imagine that Peter is speaking of the "heart" here as though it our center of emotions over against the mind with which we think. In Biblical terminology the "heart" is the location of our reasoning (Rom. 1:21), meditation (Ps. 19:14), understanding (Prov. 8:5), thinking (Deut. 7:17; 8:5) and believing (Rom. 10:10). It is just here -- in the center of our thinking and reasoning -- that Christ is to be consecrated as Lord, when we engage in apologetical discussion with inquiring unbelievers. Thus theology and apologetics have the same epistemological authority -- the same Lord over all.

Reason and Reasoning

Believers who aim to defend their faith make a serious mistake when they imagine, then, that something like "reason" should displace Christ as the ultimate authority (Lord) in their thinking and argumentation. They also fall into very sloppy and confused thinking due to misunderstanding over the word "reason."

Christians are often befuddled about "reason," not knowing whether it is something to embrace or to eschew. This is usually because they do not pinpoint the precise way in which the word is being used. It may very well be the most ambiguous and obscure word in the field of philosophy. On the

one hand, reason can be thought of as a tool - man's intellectual or mental capacity. Taken in this sense, reason is a gift of God to man, indeed part of the divine image. When God bids His people "Come let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18), we see that we, like Him, are capable of rational thought and communication. God has given us our mental abilities to serve and glorify Him. It is part of the greatest commandment of the law that we should "love the Lord thy God... with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37).

Reason Not Ultimate

On the other hand, reason can be thought of as an ultimate and independent authority or *standard* by which man judges all claims to truth, even God's. In this sense, reason is a law unto itself, as though man's mind were self-sufficient, not in need of divine revelation. This attitude commonly leads people to think that they are in a position to think independently, to govern their own lives, and to judge the credibility of God's Word based on their own insight and authority; more dramatically, this attitude deified Reason as the goddess of the French Revolution. "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools," as Paul said (Romans 1:22). This view of reason does not recognize that God is the source and precondition of man's intellectual abilities -- that reason does not make sense apart from the perspective of God's revelation. It does not recognize the sovereign and transcendent^[3] character of God's thought: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are. . . My thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

Reason as God's Gift

Should Christians endorse the use of reason? Two equal but opposite mistakes are possible in answering that question. (1) Believers can recognize the appropriateness of using reason, taken as their intellectual faculty, but then slide into endorsing reason as intellectual *autonomy*. (2) Believers can recognize the inappropriateness of reason as intellectual *autonomy*, but then mistakenly think this entails rejecting reason as an intellectual *faculty*. The first group honors God's gift to man of reasoning ability, but dishonors God through its rationalism. The second group honors God's ultimate authority and the need for obedience in all aspects of man's life, but it dishonors God through anti-intellectual pietism.

Paul counterbalances both of these errors in Colossians 2. He writes that "all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are deposited in Christ" (v. 3). Accordingly we must "beware lest anyone rob you through philosophy, even vain deceit, which is after the tradition of men, after the elementary principles of the world, and not after Christ" (v. 8). This exhortation is not a diatribe against the use of reason or the study of philosophy.

Paul makes it clear that believers have the advantage of the best reasoning and philosophy because Christ is the source of all knowledge -- *all* knowledge, not simply religious matters or sentiment. Moreover, if there are many philosophies which are not "after Christ," there is also that philosophy which is. Anti-intellectualism throws the baby out with the bath. It destroys true wisdom in the name of resisting foolishness.

On the other hand, it is equally plain from Colossians 2 that Paul does not endorse reasoning and philosophy which refuse to honor the ultimate authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in Christ that wisdom and knowledge must be found. Any alleged wisdom which follows the traditions of men and elementary principles of the world -- rather than Christ -- is to be rejected as dangerous and deceitful.

The Bible teaches us, therefore, that "reason" is not to be taken as some neutral authority in man's thinking. It is rather the intellectual capacity with which God created man, a tool to be used in serving and glorifying the ultimate authority of God Himself.

Sharpening the Tool

Reason properly understood (reasoning) is to be endorsed by believers in Christ. In particular it is to be employed in defending the Christian faith. This is one of the things which Peter communicates to us when he wrote that we should always be "ready to give a defense to anyone who asks from you a reason for the hope within you" (1 Peter 3:15). A word of explanation and defense is to be offered to those who challenge the truth of our Christian faith. We are not to obscure the glory and veracity of God by answering unbelievers with appeals to "blind faith" or thoughtless commitment. We are to "cast down reasonings and every high thing exalted against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5), realizing all along that we cannot do so unless we ourselves "bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."

In 1 Peter 3:15 Peter uses the expression "always ready." This is significant for those who wish to honor the Biblical necessity of engaging in apologetics. What the Lord asks of us is that we be *prepared* to offer an answer in defense of our faith, whenever anybody asks us for a reason. We are to be "ready" to do this -- indeed, "always ready." And that means that it is imperative that we reflect on the questions that unbelievers are likely to ask and challenges which are commonly laid down to Christianity. We should study and prepare to give reasons for our faith when the faithless ask.

Christians need to sharpen the tool of their reasoning ability so as to glorify God and vindicate the claims of the gospel. We should all give our best efforts in the service of our Savior, who termed Himself "the Truth" (John 14:6). Every believer wants to see the truth of Christ believed and honored by others. And that is why we, need to be "ready to reason" with unbelievers. This study and those which follow are intended to help us become better prepared for that necessary task.

[1] "Apologetics" is the term commonly applied to the defense of the Christian faith against the intellectual opposition and objections of unbelievers.

[2] "Epistemology" refers to one's theory of knowledge (its nature, sources, limits). When we ask "How do you know that to be true? (or how could you justify that claim?)," we are asking an epistemological question.

[3] Whatever originates beyond man's temporal experience or exceeds that finite experience is said to "transcend" man.