

§ I. INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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§ I. INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Lecture 1

What is Christian Doctrine?

Our class verse is 1 Peter 3:15 which says “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and respect.” So according to Peter we are all, as Christian believers, to be prepared to make a defense to any unbeliever who asks us why we believe what we believe, and we are to share that belief in gentleness and respect. That verse motivates what we do in Defenders class.

The Purposes to Defenders Class

There are three purposes to Defenders class:

1. *To train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths.* Now those three verbs are not just repetitive lawyer-speak. Rather these each indicates an important element of what we want to achieve in our training here. We want to *understand* basic Christian truths. We want you as Christians to have a solid grasp of what fundamental Christian teaching or doctrine is. We want you to be able to *articulate* it. We want you to be able to say what we believe in a proper and accurate way so that you are not at a loss for words when asked what you believe. You’ll learn to articulate it clearly and accurately. And we want you to *defend* it – to say not only *what* you believe, but *why* you believe it. So in the course of these lessons, although our focus is on Christian doctrine, we’ll occasionally take a detour, and we’ll look at how to defend these claims. We’ll look at some of the issues involved in the defense of the truths that we’re studying. This first purpose is our primary goal.
2. *To reach out with the Gospel to those who have not yet come to know Christ, always being ready to give a defense to anyone who should ask for a reason for our hope.* We want to be a place that is welcoming and open to seekers and unbelievers, agnostics who have questions about the Christian faith and want to explore it. So this class welcomes you if you are in that category. You can find a home here and express your doubts, your questions, and your objections freely and openly in an atmosphere of acceptance.
3. *To be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and care.* In a large mega-church like Johnson Ferry, it is important to have a local group, a sort of church within the church, of people who know your first name and who care about you and are ready to pray for you and assist you if you are going through hard times. We want to build a fellowship here of mutual encouragement that is incendiary. It’s like a fire which is burning brightly. If you take the logs in a fireplace and you pull them apart from one another, they soon grow cold and burn out. But if you gather those logs together and keep them in a bunch, then they mutually keep the fire going and keep the warmth going. We want to have that kind of fellowship in this class.

What is Christian Doctrine?

The first question that we need to ask is, “What is Christian doctrine?” I appreciate that for many of you, you don’t even know what doctrine is, and yet we are going to study it. So what is Christian doctrine? Well, the great church historian Jaroslav Pelikan defined Christian doctrine in this way: “Christian doctrine is what the church believes and teaches.” I think that is as good a definition as any. So we are concerned here with what are the basic truth claims of Christianity.

Why Study Christian Doctrine?

Now why study Christian doctrine? Let me give you four reasons that are biblically based as to why every Christian ought to be engaged in the study of Christian doctrine.¹

Every Christian is a Theologian

1. *Every Christian is a theologian* – not just those who are academically trained or are seminary professors, but every Christian is a theologian. Look at Ephesians 4:13-15. Here Paul speaks about equipping the saints for the work of the ministry and building up the body of Christ:

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Notice Paul’s goal here is to train Christians to grow into full Christian maturity and that part of Christian maturity is doctrinal sophistication. The goal is to have an understanding of Christian doctrine, so that we are not like children, not like the waves of the sea that are tossed about to and fro by every wind of doctrine that comes along. So it is part of Christian maturity to have a clear grasp of Christian doctrine.

Look also at Galatians 1:6-9 for a similar emphasis on doctrine:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Here Paul speaks in the most graphic and powerful terms about the importance of having right doctrine. If someone is preaching a different Gospel, a different account or message of Christ, Paul says let that person go to hell because that is contrary to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is what Paul preached to the Galatians when he visited them. So, again, Paul’s emphasis is on correct doctrine and understanding the truth of the Gospel.

Finally, look at Titus 1:9. The context here is the qualifications to become an elder in the church. Paul gives several qualifications to be an elder, and then in verse 9 he says, “He

¹ 4:52

must hold firm to the sure Word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.” So the elders of the church, those who are models of Christian maturity among us, are to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and they are to be able to refute those who preach false doctrine. Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t see any reason to think that Christian maturity is to be the exclusive property of the elders of the church. I think every one of us ought to aspire to have the kind of character that is described here, so that even if we are not elders, we are qualified to be one. We want to have this kind of character that Paul describes here. And we’ve seen that part of Christian maturity which an elder exemplifies is a firm grasp of Christian doctrine – to be able to teach doctrine and be able to refute those that contradict it.

So I think that every Christian ultimately is a theologian. Just in virtue of being a Christian, you are committed to a certain worldview. You are committed to things like the existence of God, the objectivity of moral values, the objectivity of truth, the deity of Christ, his resurrection from the dead, his substitutionary atonement for our sins, the existence of eternal life, the hope of resurrection and of the personal return of Christ. As a Christian, you are committed to these things. So why wouldn’t you want to understand them? The question is not whether or not you are going to be a theologian. As a Christian you are already committed to be one. The only question is: are you going to be a good one or a poor one? Are you going to have a good grasp of Christian doctrine and theology or an immature and childish one?²

Right Living Presupposes Right Thinking about God

2. Right living presupposes right thinking about God. If you read Paul’s epistles, you will notice in them a very consistent pattern. In the first part of Paul’s letters, he will lay out the doctrinal foundations of what he’s trying to teach, and then in the second half of his letters, he will turn to matters of practical application. Paul always waits until he has the doctrinal foundation laid before he turns to the practical instructions about Christian living. To see this pattern, look, for example, at the book of Ephesians. Chapters 1 to 3 talk about Christian doctrine, about the unity of the church, the gathering of the Gentiles into God’s elect body, and finally concluding with verse 20 of chapter 3. Then there is a sort of hinge verse as he transitions to the practical application to Christian living. In chapter 4, verse 1 he says, “I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” And he goes into the practical application.

Similarly, turn to Philippians for the same pattern. In Philippians you have again the first three chapters devoted to Christian doctrine. Then with chapter 4 Paul turns to his practical application about how to get along and live with one another in Christian fellowship. So right thinking about God serves as a foundation for right living. If you really understand what God is like, what he wants from us, what it means to follow Christ, then this is going to affect the way you live.

² 10:20

The Study of Doctrine is an Expression of Loving God

3. *The study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all our minds.* Matthew 22:37-38 is the story of a pharisee who comes to Jesus and asks him “What is the greatest commandment in the law?” And in verse 37 Jesus replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” As Christians we are to love God not simply with our soul, not simply with our strength, but we are to love him with our minds. And the study of his truth is one of the best ways in which you can express your love of the Lord—by wanting to know what he is like and what his truth is. So the study of Christian doctrine is a way of showing your love for God by disciplining your mind to love and to know his truth. Study of doctrine is an expression of loving God with all of our minds.

Christ Cannot Be Separated From Truths About Christ

4. *Christ cannot be separated from truths about Christ.* Look at 2 John 9-10. Here John is warning about false teachers, and he says,

Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting.³

So John here makes the doctrine of Christ the plumbline by which you measure persons coming to you claiming to be Christians or to speak in the name of Christ. If someone doesn't have the right doctrine, he doesn't have Christ. So don't be misled by persons who have perhaps a warm and fuzzy feeling about Christ and say, “Oh, I love Jesus!” but who have false doctrine. It is the doctrine which cannot be separated from the person of Christ. To have Christ involves having the correct understanding of who Christ is. Otherwise you don't really have Christ; you just have an emotional experience. Therefore doctrine is vitally important to the Christian life. Doctrine without the Holy Spirit leads to legalism. The Holy Spirit without doctrine leads to fanaticism. But doctrine with the Holy Spirit leads to true power in the Christian life. And this should be our goal – to have both the correct doctrine, the correct understanding of Christian truth, conjoined with a Spirit-filled Christian life. So we have both Word and the Spirit.

So for those four reasons I think it is vitally important that we as Christians study Christian doctrine – what the church believes and teaches.

DISCUSSION

Question: In a day when almost every word has to be defined, your first premise was doctrine is what the church believes. Would you define “the church?”

Answer: By the church I mean the body of redeemed persons – persons who are genuinely born again Christians. So the question you raise here is an important issue. As we'll see in this class, different denominations within the church will often believe and teach different doctrines. So there certainly are doctrinal differences among the brethren.

³ 14:55

Not all doctrine is true. Therefore, we'll need to try to sort out which doctrine is the most plausible understanding of Scripture. Sometimes it will be gray, sometimes we won't be able to make a clear determination, other times there will be cases where we will be able to say, "This is the way we should properly understand this doctrine."

Question: You mentioned, "Right living presupposes right thinking about God," that you have to have your doctrine correct first before you can have practical applications of it. There is a movement going about based on a book that a lot of people in the church are reading called *The Shack*. The comment I hear from a lot of people about this book is, "it has given me a new vision of God, a new relationship with God." The problem that I have and a lot of other people have with that book is that doctrinally there is lots of heresy in that book. They show God as a black female, they show the Holy Spirit as an Asian female, and that is just the tip of the iceberg with the doctrinal problems with that book. The comments I hear is that "we overlook those issues, but there is such great message of redemption and healing and forgiveness." Even within our own church we have leaders in the church, pastoral staff, Sunday school classes, women's and men's groups, that are going through this book to get out the positive aspects of the book. However, the heresies in the book are off base. Can you make any comments about the dangers of Christians going into reading of books like that and hearing those kinds of doctrines, trying to achieve some sort of practical application when doctrinally they are completely off base?

Answer: I have to confess that I haven't read that book. But I can respond to the general point that you are making. I think you are quite right about being cautious, especially those of you who are young Christians and are not doctrinally sophisticated, so that you don't spot doctrinal error when it appears.⁴ You need to be very cautious about what you read. You shouldn't read something just because it makes you feel good. Emotions can be very deceptive. Therefore, it is important to be able to discern error when you see it, so that when you read something, you won't be misled by it. Remember what Paul said. We don't want to be children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine. Too many Christians are so doctrinally uninformed that if something feels right and feels good, then they just assume that it is from God and that this is really wonderful when in fact it may well be teaching that is contrary to the truth. And I would emphasize even more that you can't separate Christ from the truths about Christ. If you don't come from the right doctrine, it is not really Christ that you've got; it is some counterfeit.

Question: Understanding correct doctrine, Paul preached that if anyone didn't understand the Christ that he was preaching and if they came preaching another Christ, let him be accursed. How do we look at doctrine and salvation?

Answer: Right doctrine is essential to salvation. This is the point I was making about not separating Christ from the truths about Christ. There are certain doctrines that have to be believed in order to be saved. For example, look at Romans 10, where Paul says in verse 9, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Now I think those are not only sufficient, but necessary, conditions of salvation. If someone doesn't believe that Jesus is Lord – for example, Jehovah's Witnesses, who think Jesus is some kind of first created being, or

⁴ 20:00

Mormons, who do not think that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity and therefore of the same essence with the Father, or other cultist groups – I do not think these groups are avenues of salvation. Someone can't believe those things and be a genuinely born again Christian. Similarly, the resurrection. If someone denies that Jesus rose from the dead and thinks that Jesus was just a good man, whose corpse rotted away in the grave – that person would not be regarded by Paul as a genuine Christian. So I would say that certain doctrines are essential to salvation. That doesn't mean, however, that all Christian doctrines are essential to salvation. There are many doctrines that are secondary in nature and on which Christians can disagree. For example, a classic case would be the question of the pre-tribulation return of Christ versus the post-tribulation return of Christ. Your salvation isn't going to hang on the answer to that question. In fact, as I've said often in class, I think that every one of us has doctrinal errors. The chances that any one of us has a perfectly complete and correct body of doctrine are pretty remote. So all of us need to be humble about the secondary doctrines and to hold fast and firm on the foundational or cardinal doctrines.

Question: How do we decide, since there are so many disagreements among various Christian denominations? I can imagine a secular skeptic listening and ask what criteria do you use to know who is right?

Answer: That is a great segue into the next section of this class, which is Doctrine of Revelation! We are going to look at the Doctrine of Revelation, which is, at its essence, a question of authority. Who determines what is right doctrine and what is wrong doctrine? I'll argue that God himself is the source of authority and that therefore we need to find out what God thinks about these things. How do we find that out? – through his revelation. We'll see that that revelation is not only in nature but also especially in the Bible, in his Word to us. Then it will become a question of correctly understanding God's Word.⁵ We can then argue about what is the correct understanding when we have different views, say, of baptism or different views of the atonement or different views of divine eternity. We can see which of these squares most faithfully with the teaching of Scripture. In some cases I think we'll be able to come to some conclusions about that. In other cases we'll hold our conclusions more tentatively and provisionally, recognizing that there can be honest differences among the brethren.

Question: In Romans 10, it says you believe in your heart. How do we know or how can we be sure that what our belief is is our heart belief, not our head belief? Further down the page it has a verse that is quoted in Joel as well as in Acts. It says, "For all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." For me personally, I put my salvation strictly on that one verse. And I don't know whether I chose him or whether he chose me – I don't know how to explain that. I don't understand it. But when I get to heaven, if God tells me that I missed the right verse, it was "all who called from Alabama" or something like that. . .

Answer: Well, of course, the verse says what it does, and so you can place your confidence in it. But in answer to your question, I think that what Paul says back in Romans 8:14ff has something to say about this:

⁵ 24:52

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ

So I take it that it is fundamentally the witness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer that gives you the confidence that this is not just head knowledge or doctrinal affirmation, which, as you quite rightly point out, is not enough. Being a Christian is not simply a matter of believing the right doctrines. I mean, the demons all believe the right doctrines, right? The demons know the truth, they believe the right doctrine, but they don’t know God because they don’t have the presence of the Spirit of God. So I would say that we need to examine ourselves to see if we have this inner testimony of the Spirit. If we do have this assurance of salvation, this sense of God’s fatherhood, that we’re his children, then I think we can be confident that our belief isn’t just head belief, but that we are genuinely born-again, regenerate followers of Christ. That is independent of your views on predestination and freedom of the will and all the rest that you alluded to.

Question: I was wondering on the subject of doctrine, would you consider some of the Catholic doctrines on these additional sacraments that the Protestant church doesn’t technically believe in – such as some of the requirements of baptism for salvation or confession. Do you believe that that’s a major shift of doctrine enough that it can determine whether you are saved or not.

Answer: No, I don’t. Not those doctrines anyway! I am not a Catholic, but we do have Catholic brethren in our class, who are welcome. I don’t think that doctrines pertinent to, for example, the number of the sacraments or whether marriage is a sacrament are cardinal doctrines. Now I do think that the doctrine of justification is a cardinal doctrine – that I do think is very important. How you are saved or what it means to be justified; here there has been a good deal of work ongoing on Catholic/Protestant dialogue because traditionally they have disagreed over this. I think there’s been some coalescence on this issue at least. I myself don’t like the Catholic doctrine of justification as it’s stated at the Council of Trent. We’ll talk about that when we get to the section on Doctrine of Salvation. We have a lengthy section in which we’ll look at different views of justification. But I have met Catholic Christians who interpret Trent in such a way to make it acceptable. One of the Catholic members of the class came up to me after a lecture and said, “What you are teaching *is* what Catholics believe! You are right in line with us.”⁶ He didn’t see that there was any opposition there at all. So there are cardinal doctrines that are important, and I think that Catholic and Protestants and Orthodox stand on the same footing on most of these. There are important Reformation truths pertinent to the nature of justification and salvation by grace alone that I think are critical and need to be talked about. Here we need to be able to understand each other and to get past the formulas to understanding how you understand this formula and what it means to you.

Question: It appears that in our postmodern society right now people have been trained up to believe that because nothing can be certain, we cannot even have a certainty about the basic tenets of the faith. And I believe, more than we’d like to realize, that this is a

⁶ 30:02

pervasive thought among a lot of people. Because we can call into question certain doctrines that you mentioned today, disagreements between Catholics and Protestants, there appears to be many people applying postmodernism. They don't feel truth can be known from the Scriptures. And they cast doubt on the inerrancy of Scripture because there are multiple interpretations: you think this way, I think that way. Who's to say you are right and I'm wrong? Would you just address how important that is – to change the whole way we have this worldview that prevents people from realizing that truth can be found in the Scripture?

Answer: Well, I think that some people give lip service to postmodernism, which is a movement that denies the objectivity of truth and rationality and logic and sees these different doctrines as just expressions of power on the part of different communities. It seems to me that that view is quite wrong and, indeed, self-defeating. For if that were true, then even their own statements would not be objectively true or false but would be just the result of a power grab by the postmodern community. So it's ultimately self-defeating.

I think, though, that what lies at the root of a lot of this thinking is an invalid equation of *knowledge* with *certainty*, which I think we need to break very sharply. That is to say, people think that unless you are certain about something, you don't know it. That is an understanding of what knowledge is that goes very far back – it's Platonic in fact! This is what the ancient Greek philosopher Plato believed. Plato thought that our knowledge of the world around us is uncertain and really not knowledge at all – but just opinion. What is real knowledge is certainty of mathematical truths and other necessary truths. I think that this is a false equation that would land you in almost complete skepticism about everything because we're not really certain about almost anything. For example, take the belief that you have a head. Now you might think that you are certain that you have a head. But theoretically you could be just a brain in a vat of chemicals wired up with electrodes in such a way that you have this virtual reality experience of having a body. But nobody takes that seriously. Of course, we know that we have heads! The point is that we should not equate certainty with knowledge. You can know something without having 100% certainty of it.

So with regard to the correct interpretation of Christian doctrine, I think we can know what Paul is saying in the book of Romans without needing to have absolute certainty of it. What we do is weigh the arguments for and against an interpretation and then on the basis of the arguments make up our mind as to what is the truth about reality. So don't be sucked in by this invalid equation of knowledge with certainty. That simply is not correct. We can know things even if we are not psychologically certain of them. (By the way, you can be certain of things that you don't know, as well. When my son was 17 years old, he was very certain of things – “Trust me, Dad!” he'd often say. And then it would turn out to be wrong. So you can be certain of things and be wrong about it – not know it at all.) So don't make this equation. And also don't make the equation that just because you don't know something, there isn't any truth to be known. There are lots of truths that we don't know. We don't know whether Napoleon spat in a puddle on April 8, 1805, but either he did or he didn't. That's true or false, independently of whether we can know it. So even if our knowledge is shifting and provisional, that doesn't mean that there isn't any objective truth out there, as postmodernists seem to think.

Let me just close our time today with this: next time I'm going to talk about why we should study Christian apologetics as well as doctrine. I'm going to challenge this assumption that we live in a postmodern culture and society. I think that we do not, in fact, live in a postmodern culture – that is a myth. Next week I will explain why I think this is a myth and why that insight underlines the importance of having training in apologetics as well as doctrine.⁷

⁷ Total Running Time: 35:50 (Copyright © 2012 William Lane Craig)

§ I. INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Lecture 2

Why Study Christian Apologetics?

Last week we opened the class by talking about reasons to study Christian doctrine. I explained that the study of Christian doctrine is part and parcel of Christian maturity. If you want to be a mature Christian, following Christ, being a disciple of Christ, then you will have a desire to learn and master Christian doctrine, which just is the truth about God, salvation, the world, Christ, and so forth.

Now in addition to that we are going to be talking in this class, not simply about Christian doctrine, but also about apologetics. So I'd like to share three reasons as to why I think the study of apologetics is also important.

Why Study Christian Apologetics?

Shaping Culture

1. *Shaping culture.* Apologetics is extremely valuable, and may even be necessary, if the Gospel is to be effectively heard in Western society today. Our Western culture has become deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which was a movement in 17th and 18th century Europe that threw off the institutional church and the monarchy in the name of free thought, that is to say, the pursuit of truth by unbridled human reason alone, unfettered by the authority of church or state. Now it is by no means inevitable that such free thought has to lead to atheistic conclusions – Antony Flew is an example of someone who claimed that he pursued free thought, followed the evidence where it leads, and he came to believe in God. Nevertheless, the overwhelming impact of the Enlightenment mentality on Western culture has been that Western intellectuals generally do not consider theological knowledge to be possible. Theology is not a source of genuine knowledge, and therefore theology is not a science. “Science” comes from the Latin word *scientia*, which means knowledge. Theology is not a science, it is not a source of knowledge, and therefore reason and religion are at odds with each other. The deliverances of the physical sciences alone are taken to be the arbiter of truth. And the confident assumption by Western secularists is that if you follow reason unflinchingly towards its end, then you will arrive at a purely naturalistic picture of the world, a picture which will be atheistic or at best agnostic.

Now why are these considerations of culture important? Very simply, because *the Gospel is never heard in isolation*. It is always heard against the cultural backdrop in which a person is raised. A person who is raised in a culture in which the Gospel is still an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women will be open to the Gospel in the way that a secularized person will not. To give an example, suppose that you were approached on the street by a devotee of the Hari Krishna movement, with his shaved head and saffron robes, and he invited you to believe in Krishna. You would probably think such an invitation was bizarre, freakish, maybe even funny. But if a person on the streets of New Delhi or Mumbai were to have such an encounter, that invitation would probably be taken very seriously and give him serious cause for reflection. Why?

Because it is culturally accepted in India to have Hindu beliefs, whereas in our culture it is not.

What awaits us here in North America if our slide into secularism remains unchecked is already previewed in Europe. Although the majority of Europeans still maintain a nominal affiliation with Christianity, only about 10% of Europeans are practicing believers, and less than half of those are evangelical believers. The most significant trend in European religious affiliation has been the growth of those classed as non-religious. It went from effectively 0% of the population in 1900 to over 22% today.⁸ As a result evangelism is immeasurably more difficult in Europe than it is here in the United States. As one who has lived for 13 years in Europe and spoken at European universities, both in eastern and western Europe, I can testify how hard the ground is. Missionaries have to work for years to just win a handful of converts. The problem is, of course, that they are working in a cultural milieu in which the Gospel is just not taken seriously as an intellectual option.

For that reason people who depreciate the value of apologetics because “Nobody comes to Christ through arguments” don’t understand the wider picture. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics to create a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can still be heard as a legitimate option for thinking people. People may not come to Christ through the arguments, but the arguments give them *permission* to believe, as it were – the intellectual permission to believe when their hearts are moved by the preaching of the Gospel and by the Holy Spirit.

In his article, “Christianity and Culture,” the great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen wrote,

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.⁹

Unfortunately, Machen’s warning (which was issued in 1913) went unheeded, and biblical Christianity retreated into the closets of fundamentalism and cultural isolationism. It withdrew from the academy and society at large. It has only been in recent decades that we’ve begun to re-emerge.

Now, I believe, we are living at a time in history when huge doors of opportunity stand open before us. We are living at a time when Christian philosophy is undergoing a veritable renaissance, which has revitalized natural theology, or arguments for the existence of God. We’re living at a time when modern science is more open to the existence of a transcendent Creator and Designer of the universe than at any time in recent memory. And we’re living at a time when biblical criticism has largely established the credibility of the outlines of the New Testament life of Jesus, so that the Gospels are now regarded once again as serious historical sources for the life of Christ. This is a

⁸ 5:00

⁹ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): p. 7.

tremendously exciting time to be alive and working in apologetics. I think that we're well poised intellectually to regain lost ground and to help reshape our culture in such a way that the Gospel can be heard as a legitimate option for people today.

Now some of you may be thinking, "But don't we live in a postmodern culture in which these appeals to rational arguments and evidence are no longer effective? Since postmodernists deny the objectivity of truth and logic and rationality, these arguments and apologetic evidences aren't effective. Rather in a postmodern culture we should simply share our narrative and invite people to participate in it."

I think that this kind of thinking represents a disastrous misdiagnosis of Western culture. The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth which is propagated in our churches by misguided youth ministers. In fact, a postmodern culture, when you think about it, is an impossibility. It would be utterly unlivable. Nobody is a postmodernist when it comes to reading the labels on a bottle of aspirin and a box of rat poison. If you've got a headache, you better believe that texts have objective meaning! So when you talk to people, you'll find that they are not postmodernist about matters of science and technology and engineering. They are relativistic and pluralistic when it comes to matters of religion and ethics – but that's not postmodernism, that's modernism!¹⁰ That is exactly the modernistic view according to which science gives us the truth about natural reality, and things that cannot be proved by science, like ethics and religion, are just expressions of personal taste and emotive feelings. We live in a culture which remains deeply modernist at its core.

In fact, I think that postmodernism is one of the craftiest deceptions that Satan has yet devised. "Modernism is dead!" he says, "Ignore it! You don't need to fear modernism any longer." Meanwhile modernism, pretending to be dead, comes back around in a fancy, new costume in the guise of postmodernism. And Satan says to us, "Your old arguments are no longer effective against this new challenger! Lay them down, they're of no use, just share your narrative!" And so we lay aside voluntarily our best weapons of logic and evidence and have nothing left to commend the *truth* of what we share. If the church adopts this strategy, then what will happen in the next generation is that Christianity will be reduced to just one more voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each one sharing its own narrative and none commending itself as the objective truth about reality. Truth will be given to us by scientific naturalism, which will continue to shape our culture's view of how the world *really* is.

So I think that the idea that we live in a postmodern culture and that we must therefore abandon rational apologetics and evidence is a suicidal prescription for the church. Now, of course, it goes without saying that in doing apologetics, we need to be relational and humble and invitational rather than argumentative and mean-spirited and offensive. We saw that 1 Peter 3:15 says that we should share the reasons for the hope within us with gentleness and respect. You don't have to be a postmodernist to exemplify those kinds of biblical virtues.

So I find that it's very important that we not allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that we no longer live in a modernist culture in which it is vital to present a rational case

¹⁰ 10:00

for the objective truth of the Christian Gospel. I think that we *do* live in a modernist culture and that it is vital that we shape our culture in such a way as to preserve a milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as a legitimate option today. So the first role of apologetics is shaping culture.

Strengthening Believers

2. *Strengthening believers.* The second reason to study apologetics is for strengthening believers. Apologetics is not only vital in shaping our culture, but it's also vital in the lives of individual persons. I think one of those individual roles will be strengthening Christian believers.

When I was studying for my doctoral exams in theology, Jan and I lived for a summer in Berlin in Germany. While we were there, we were visited by Ann Kiemel and her new husband Will. Now those of you who remember Ann will know that she was an extremely sentimental and emotional women's speaker. She would speak to large groups of women audiences and in a matter of minutes would have them all reduced to tears by her stories and anecdotes that she told. She was a unique person – she would meet total strangers and sing to them little ditties about the Lord and share her little stories with them and lead them to Christ. She would tell story after story how even hard-boiled academics would be melted by her little ditties and stories and would be brought to the Lord.

Well, as we were sitting around the dinner table one evening in the apartment in Berlin, I thought I'd profit a little from her experience as a speaker. So I said to her, "Ann, how do you prepare for your messages?"

She said, "Oh, I don't prepare."

I said, "You don't prepare?!"

And she said, "No."

I said, "Well, then, what do you do?"

And she said, "Oh, I just share my struggles."

I thought, *She just shares her struggles! Here I am killing myself in years of study to earn this doctorate in theology in Germany – and she doesn't prepare!* This really shook me because there was no denying the effectiveness of her ministry. I thought, *Am I just barking up the wrong tree? Is all of this study a waste of time? Why am I doing all this study when all I have to do is share my struggles?*¹¹

Well, we returned to the States that fall to do a sabbatical at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where a former classmate lived. I shared with him one day about how my conversation with Ann had sort of taken the wind out of my sails. He said something to me that was very reassuring. He said, "Bill, someday those people that Ann Kiemel has brought to the Lord are going to need what you have to offer." And I thought, *Yes, that is exactly right!* Emotional experiences can only carry you so far, and then you are going to need something more substantive to back it up. Apologetics can help to provide some of that substance.

¹¹ 15:13

When I travel around the country speaking in various churches, I meet parents all the time who come up to me after the service and say something like this: “Oh, if only you had been here two or three years ago! Our son (or our daughter) had questions about the faith which no one could answer. And now he (or she) is far from the Lord.” It just breaks my heart to meet parents like this. The fact is that our Christian high school students and college students are intellectually assaulted in secular high school and university by overwhelming relativism conjoined with every manner of non-Christian philosophy. We dare not send these kids out to battle armed with rubber swords and plastic armor. We need to prepare our kids for war. That’s why I’m so glad for those of you who are high school students that are in this class. I value your presence in this class, and I value the presence of any of you who are parents of young children because I’m convinced we’ve got to train our children in apologetics from the youthful age up. Begin simple, get more profound as they grow. It’s not enough anymore to just read Bible stories to our kids. They need doctrine, and they need apologetics. I have to tell you the truth: I find it very difficult to understand how parents today can risk having children without having had some training in Christian apologetics. I think it’s that important! So strengthening believers is one way in which apologetics can also be of help.

Evangelizing Unbelievers

3. *Evangelizing unbelievers.* The third reason to study apologetics is for evangelizing unbelievers. I think most people would agree that apologetics is useful in strengthening believers, but many will say that apologetics isn’t any good in evangelism. “Nobody comes to Christ through arguments!” I don’t know how many times I’ve heard this said.

Now this dismissive attitude towards apologetics is certainly not the biblical view. As you read the Acts of the Apostles, you discover that it was the standard procedure of people like Paul to argue for the truth of the Christian faith. He would go into the synagogue, and he would argue with them, trying to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah. He would rent the Hall of Tyrannus and for two years deliver daily lectures there, debating and arguing with anyone who would come to hear him speak. So the apostles were not at all afraid to argue for the truth of the Christian faith. That doesn’t mean they didn’t trust the Holy Spirit to bring people to Christ. Rather it means they trusted the Holy Spirit to *use* their arguments and evidence to help bring people to Christ.

I think that those who believe that apologetics is not effective in evangelism just frankly haven’t done enough evangelism. I think that they probably tried sharing the arguments a few times, and they were unsuccessful. So then they draw this sweeping conclusion that apologetics isn’t useful in evangelism. I think they are just victims of false expectations. When you think that only a minority of people who hear the Gospel will respond to it affirmatively and that only a minority of those who do so will do so for intellectual reasons, we shouldn’t be surprised that most people will not be convinced by our apologetic arguments, just as they are not convinced by the preaching of the cross. So we shouldn’t have the expectation that the unbeliever is just going to roll over and play dead when he hears our great apologetic case for Christianity. Of course, he’s going to argue back! Think of what is at stake for him! Think of what you are asking him to do! So we

should not be surprised if we meet resistance.¹²

Now you might say, “But then why bother with that minority of a minority with whom apologetic arguments are effective?” Well, first of all because every person is precious to God. Every person is a person for whom Christ died. Like a missionary who was called to reach some obscure people group, the Christian apologist feels burdened to reach that minority of persons who will respond to intellectual argument and evidence. But secondly – and here I think the case differs radically from the obscure people group – this people group that can be reached through apologetics, though small in numbers, is huge in influence. Just think of the influence a man like C.S. Lewis has had! He was one of those people. Think of the reverberation that that one man’s conversion continues to have! I find that the people who resonate most with my own apologetic work tend to be engineers, doctors (or people in the medical profession), teachers, and lawyers. These are some of the most influential people in our culture today. So reaching this minority will have a huge impact for the kingdom of God.

In any case, the general conclusion that apologetics is ineffective in evangelism is just hasty and overdrawn. Lee Strobel remarked to me that he has lost count of the number of people that have come to Christ through his books, *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*. I believe that when you share your personal testimony and are prepared to give good answers and evidence for what you believe, the Spirit of God will use you to draw people to himself. I’ve seen it happen myself all the time when I speak on university campuses.

Summary and Conclusion

So to wrap up this section of the Introduction to Christian doctrine and apologetics, I think that Christian apologetics is a vital part of Christian discipleship. It helps to shape the broader culture in which we live so as to make the Gospel an option for thinking people, it strengthens believers in their faith, and it is also useful in evangelizing unbelievers. For all of these reasons I am an unapologetically enthusiastic about Christian apologetics!

In this class we’ll be studying Christian doctrine, and then as we confront apologetic issues along the way, we’ll take an excursion and discuss what good reasons (or objections) there are for that Christian doctrine and then resume our study of doctrine.

That completes my introductory comments. The next time that I’m with you we will begin the first section of our class, which will be on the Doctrine of Revelation, in which we’ll study how God reveals himself and his truth to us.¹³

¹² 20:00

¹³ Total Running Time: 23:15 (Copyright © 2012 William Lane Craig)