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REASONS for FAITH

MAKING A CASE FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

A Quick Focus

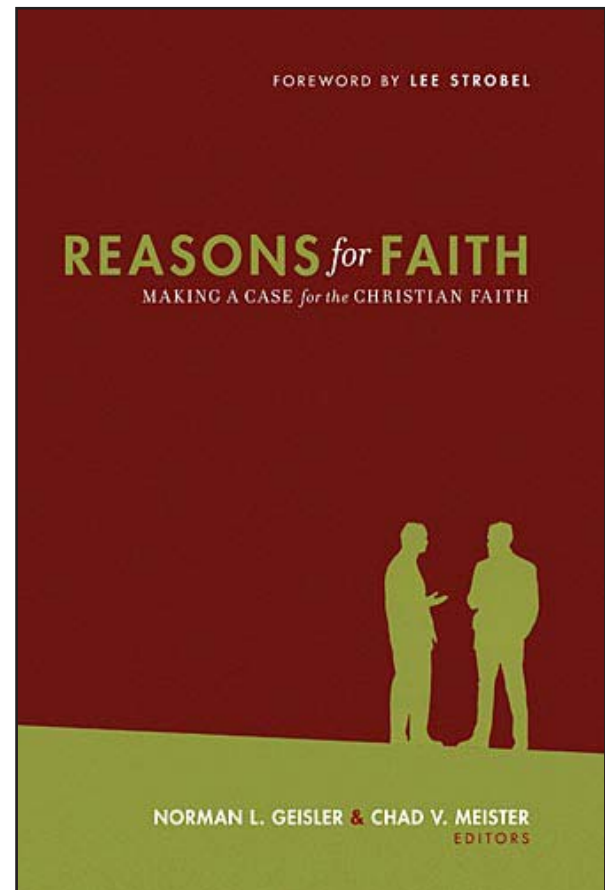
The Book's Purpose

- Provide Christians with tools and information that will allow them to “always be prepared to give an answer” for their faith (I Peter 3:15)
- Give an overview of some of the most pressing challenges and issues in contemporary Christian apologetics
- Nourish the faith of Christians and provide compelling answers to those who are seekers and skeptics

The Book's Message

In a time when the truth and plausibility of Christian claims are constantly under fire, believers must equip themselves to defend their faith in the marketplace of ideas. Committed to assembling a practical handbook for defending a biblical worldview, two leading defenders of the faith have gathered helpful essays.

Top Christian apologists weigh in and offer well-documented information addressing a myriad of topics, including the nature of apologetics, arguments for the existence of God, the impact of postmodernism on apologetics, and the relationship between Christianity and other religions and belief systems.



Norman L. Geisler & Chad V. Meister,
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Five Main Points

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WHAT is Apologetics and WHY Do We Need It?

Christian apologetics is giving a clear, reasonable defense of our faith. Often called “the handmaiden to evangelism,” apologetics develops and articulates the logic and evidence that clear away intellectual impediments to faith. Christian apologetics is not merely the domain of theologians, pastors, and scholars. All of us who are followers of Christ must be able to give cogent reasons for our faith. In defending God’s truth, we honor Him and demonstrate our love for His children.

“We should be ready to explain who that Son of God is and be able to articulate and defend the truth of his unique claims, mission, and work on our behalf, so that the much-loved people of this world will be able to believe in him.”

An apologetics that is relevant to contemporary culture (and especially today’s youth) must acknowledge the fact that postmodern people are encouraged to select what they want from a vast religious smorgasbord and assemble their own truth. Belief systems are not believed to be true because of any objective standard of truth, but simply because someone chooses to believe them. Many young people today ***“believe that the act of believing makes things true.”***

In order to help people move beyond this self-centered subjectivism, we must help them examine the evidence for biblical truth and come to a place of genuine conviction that Christianity is objectively true. This will require a new kind of Christian apologetics that helps today’s youth see Christianity as both reasonable and compelling—both objectively true and relevant to the fundamental questions of their lives, questions such as, Who am I? Why am I here? and Where am I going?

Effective apologetics in the 21st century is not the same thing as dogmatics. While dogmatics begins with God’s revelation of Himself to us, apologetics begins with the questions and objections of the unbeliever. Apologists must avoid both the conservative error of discussing philosophical issues that have little or no relevance to effective evangelism, and the liberal error of excessive accommodation to secular culture for fear of offending.

In order to avoid these errors and develop sound apologetics for this time, Christian apologists must argue vigorously that the only way to have a fulfilling life is by knowing Christ. At the same time, a believer must

strongly attack the logical fallacies of non-Christian worldviews, boldly defend the truth claims of Christianity, respond directly to the questions and concerns of the unbeliever, and fully incorporate apologetics into his or her life.

“The 21st century apologist needs to take apologetics far more seriously. He needs to incorporate apologetics into every aspect of his or her ministry~ every sermon, every class, every evangelistic activity.”

Apologetics has traditionally been divided into three methodological schools:

- **Classical apologetics** (also known as natural theology) begins with arguments for undeniable “first principles” such as the laws of logic, self-existence, meaning, and morality. Once these first principles are established, the apologist moves on to arguments for the existence of God and finally to evidence for the Christian faith.
- The **evidentialist school** places its emphasis on the historical, archaeological, rational, scientific, and experimental evidence for the truth claims of Christianity.
- The **presuppositionalist school** suggests that truth can only be understood when you presuppose the truth of biblical revelation. The task of the apologist is therefore to demonstrate to the unbeliever that his/her presuppositions about life and truth are irrational.

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WHAT IS APOLOGETICS AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?
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• A **both/and approach** to apologetics blends these three in order to maximize the strengths and limit the weaknesses of each methodology. The apostle Paul models this both/and approach in his proclamation of the gospel to Jews and to Gentiles. We see this most poignantly in Athens (Acts 17) where he treats his audience with respect, begins with concepts they know and understand, and ultimately moves them from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Like the presuppositionalists, Paul affirms the importance of the personal knowledge of God. But like the classicists and evidentialists, Paul uses logic and evidence to persuade his listeners to consider Christ.

“Apologetics cannot bring a person into the kingdom of God, but such a defense serves to assist a potential convert to receive the God of revelation when the Spirit works.”

CBS

CULTURAL and THEOLOGICAL Issues in Apologetics

Christian apologists must be able to identify and describe the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Essential doctrines are those that make salvation possible. *“That is to say, salvation as God has revealed it would not be possible without this being true.”*

A theological review of the teachings of the New Testament identifies 14 of these doctrines: human depravity, the virgin birth, Christ’s sinlessness, Christ’s deity, Christ’s humanity, God’s unity, God’s triunity, the necessity of God’s grace, the necessity of faith, Christ’s atoning death, Christ’s bodily resurrection, Christ’s bodily ascension, Christ’s present intercession, and Christ’s second coming.

It is important to note that while all of these doctrines are required in order for salvation to be possible, a person does not have to explicitly believe all these doctrines in order to be saved. The identification of these 14 doctrines as essential is affirmed by a historical review of the early creeds and confessions of the Christian movement. In addition to these 14 essential soteriological doctrines, we must also affirm one epistemological fundamental—the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, and one hermeneutical fundamental—the literal historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation.

“Knowing which doctrines are essential to the Christian faith is necessary for the preservation of orthodox Christianity, the delineation of heresy, and the identification of cults. It is also necessary for Christian unity, for there is no true unity without unity in the truth.”

Postmodern views of truth present a daunting challenge to the Christian apologist. Historically, the correspondence theory of truth has held that a proposition is true to the extent that it corresponds with reality. Postmodernism, however, rejects the correspondence theory of truth, *claiming that truth is simply a contingent creation of language that expresses customs, emotions, and values embedded in a community’s linguistic practices*.

For the postmodern, there is no such thing as objective truth, and any claims to truth are simply social constructions. This view of truth reflects five critical misunderstandings 1) about the nature of absolute truth, 2) about knowledge and objectivity, 3) about the relationship between classical foundationalism and foundationalism per se, 4) about the identity of the truth bearer, and 5) about perception. Postmodernism is an irrespon-

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sible view of the truth that is riddled with confusion. We as Christians must unapologetically face it and expose its flaws.

Issues related to the separation of church and state must be navigated wisely as we attempt to speak to matters of faith in the public square. The exact meaning of the First Amendment's antiestablishment clause continues to be vigorously debated. It clearly intends to maximize religious freedom and prohibit any kind of government control of religion. However, moderate separationists and strong separationists disagree about the extent to which the clause intends to marginalize religion from all spheres of public life. ***"The role of government is to protect the people's God-given rights while the role of religion is to shape the moral understanding of the nation's people so that they may be upright citizens."***

The anti-Catholic sentiments of the 19th and early 20th century moved the United States in the direction of strong separation between church and state. However, there are many compelling historical reasons not to equate the Constitution's antiestablishment clause with a strong view of separation. In a democracy, all citizens (both secular and religious) should be able to express their ideas and offer their strongest arguments for those ideas in the public square.

The life and example of C. S. Lewis can teach us an effective and integrated method for bringing the tenets of our Christian worldview into the marketplace of ideas. Central to this methodology is putting away what Lewis calls "chronological snobbery"—that is, our proclivity to view our own historical era as theologically, philosophically, and aesthetically superior to all past ages.

Our efforts to provide a defense of our faith are seriously compromised by the unspoken assumption that the era from which Christianity originated and the era during which Christianity reigned in Europe were unenlightened periods of time. Instead, we must be willing to become familiar with earlier eras of the Christian faith and challenge the view that those were "dark ages" that have nothing of importance to say to contemporary culture.

Christian apologists must become informed about the pro-life position and capable of defending it. The case for life is rooted in the conviction that an unborn child is a member of the human family and that to kill him or her is a serious moral offense. Pro-life advocates defend this viewpoint on the scientific ground that from the earliest stages of development, the human embryo and fetus is a growing, living, whole human being. They defend this view on the philosophical ground that no significant moral difference exists between a fully developed adult and a developing embryo.

Several developments within the field of bioethics are providing serious challenges to the sanctity of human life and are potentially clearing the way for human cloning and fetus farming. Those developments include faulty scientific thinking, misleading so-called bans on cloning that do not in fact prohibit cloning, intolerance that is disguised as moral neutrality, personhood ethics that suggest humans have value only when they become self-aware, and a deepening sense of moral relativism. In light of these developments, concerned Christians must passionately and boldly defend the pro-life point of view.

The field of historical theology can be used productively in developing a Christian apologetic in the 21st century. It can be used "negatively" to defeat false and dubious claims that are often made about the Christian faith and the history of the Christian church. Examples of this approach

include responding to the false claims of the novel *The DaVinci Code* and uncovering the historical fallacies inherent in the Mormon religion.

Positively, historical theology can be used to strengthen the Christian apologist's thinking and to develop the historical methodologies that can be of great use in the task of apologetics, i.e., understanding original documents, perceiving what is beneath an argument, and discerning historical context. As historians and apologists, we should follow the golden rule of apologetics: ***"We should do unto other's arguments and texts as we would have them do unto ours. None of us appreciates being misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented, and we must take care to treat others with the same respect. We can do nothing less as lovers of the truth."***

A rapidly growing view of God and the future is called the "openness of God" view or "Open Theism." Open theists maintain that God does not know everything that will happen in the future. While He does know what He Himself will do in the future and also knows everything about the future that can be inferred from present events and conditions, He does not know future contingent events—that is, future events that are not determined causally by present events. With regard to those types of events, God knows what could happen in the future but does not know what will happen.

Three types of evidence speak against Open theism and affirm the traditional biblical view of God's infallible foreknowledge: biblical, historical, and philosophical. In addition to these compelling evidences against the openness of God, several practical and theological concerns arise from this view: a lack of confidence in divine guidance, the loss of divine comfort, the denial of biblical prophecies, and a faulty hermeneutic that views anthropomorphic biblical statements as literally true.

DEFENDING Christian THEISM

The cosmological argument for the existence of God has its roots in the thinking of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and it suggests that the existence of the world leads to the logical conclusion that there must be a God who created it. We intuitively understand that events and things have causes; the very existence of the universe thus implies the existence of a “first cause” that brought the universe into existence. In order to explain the existence of the finite, contingent beings in the universe, there must be a being that is not restricted by time or space, that did not have a beginning, and that is not contingent on anything else for its existence. This infinite, noncontingent being is God.

The teleological argument for the existence of God (also known as the argument from design) has two formulations. The first formulation suggests that the balance, order, harmony, and design that we see in the universe are compelling evidences for the existence of a creator/designer. More recent formulations of this argument stem from modern discoveries in science, and they suggest that the preconditions for life that exist on our planet are so precise and finely tuned that they could not conceivably be in place without a divine designer. *“There are features within the world that seem designed to achieve some purpose. By means of these features, we infer that the world is the handiwork of an intelligent designer, God.”*

A significant problem for the Darwinian worldview is that certain biological traits clearly have functions, e.g., a heart’s function is to pump blood and the purpose of eagle wings is to fly. These functions would seem to strongly imply that those traits were somehow planned or designed with that purpose in mind. A further problem for an evolutionary view is the fact of irreducible complexity—certain biological and biochemical systems are built in such a way that removing even one part renders the system dysfunctional. Inferring design is a normal part of our thinking process whenever we see objects that reflect specified complexity. When we look at our universe, we know that the intelligent and transcendent designer is God.

The transcendental argument for the existence of God states that without God, such fundamental phenomenon as logic, science, and morality would not be possible. Some apologists have unwisely attempted to use this argument as proof for the existence of the Christian God—such attempts are too ambitious. The transcendental argument can be used productively, however, as an argument for theism in general.

The fact that human beings experience so much pain, loss, suffering, disappointment, and disillusionment presents daunting challenges to the Christian apologist—where is God in the midst of so much evil? Commonly called “the problem of evil,” this argument against the Christian conception of God goes like this: *“If God is omnipotent he could prevent evil if he wanted to, and if he is morally perfect he would desire to prevent evil if*

he wanted to, and if he is morally perfect he would desire to prevent evil if he could. Since the Christian God has both the desire to prevent evil and the power to fulfill that desire, there shouldn’t be any evil at all. But obviously there is evil in the world. So the Christian God doesn’t exist.” The task of the Christian apologist is to demonstrate that the perfect goodness and omnipotence of God can coexist with the reality of suffering in the world.

A first step is to point out that God wanted to create a world with creatures who are genuinely free and thereby able to make choices that bring evil into their own lives and the lives of others. A second step is to suggest that God may in fact have morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil in the world. A key distinction here is the one between gratuitous evil (evil that has no justification) and inscrutable evil (evil for which the justification is beyond our understanding). *“If God has revealed to us the extraordinary purpose that makes sense of the suffering of Jesus, then we have reason enough to believe that no suffering is genuinely gratuitous.”*

Surprisingly, the existence of evil in the world also provides an argument for the existence of God—namely, how can we even identify something as evil without acknowledging the existence of a plan for how things should be in our world? And how can that plan exist without a planner?

“The crowning consideration in our response to the problem of evil is that God has done something about evil. He himself passes through it, experiences it, and defeats it.”

The 2003 release of the novel *The DaVinci Code* presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities for the Christian apologist. The novel makes a number of outrageous claims about Jesus, the Bible, and the gospel that must be responded to and debunked. Four of the central claims are 1) that the deity of Jesus was the result of a closely contested vote in AD 325, 2) that the Bible as we know it was not collated until that same time, 3) that the Gnostic gospels contain accounts of Jesus' life more accurate than those of the New Testament, and 4) that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and fathered children with her. None of these claims stand up to any honest reading of history, and so the claims of *The DaVinci Code* do nothing to undermine the truth of historic, orthodox Christianity.

A strong majority of (even secular) scholars now concede the reality of certain key facts about the end of Jesus' life and the beginning of the Christian movement: Jesus' death by Roman crucifixion, the discovery of His empty tomb, the transformation of His disciples, the birth of the Church, and the conversion of many skeptics (including the apostle Paul). There remains among these same scholars, however, a "reverent agnosticism" about the actual resurrection. They suggest that such a supernatural event would be beyond the bounds of what can be proven or disproven by history. But this agnostic position about the resurrection has a number of intrinsic problems.

First, it requires of the Christian faith a level of certainty that no historian can live up to about any ancient historical event.

Second, it is based just as much on an assertion (i.e., that the resurrection cannot be proven) as belief in the resurrection.

Third, the resurrection agnostic assumes that the supernatural realm is questionable.

Fourth, it fails to answer the question, What is the best explanation for what happened after Jesus' death?

Fifth, the agnostic fails to follow the results of his or her own research to their own logical conclusion.

And sixth, there is strong evidence from near-death experiences that the afterlife is a reality. *"The view that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead makes the best sense of the historical and other data."*

CBS

WORLD Religious MOVEMENTS

"The church ... has an inescapable scriptural duty to defend her faith, not just against atheism, agnosticism, and worldly philosophy, but also against cults, sects, heresies, the occult, and world religions."

Since Mormonism condemns Christianity in its sacred texts as "all wrong" and "an abomination," it stands out as a cult that must be responded to by Christian apologists. These attacks from the Mormon faith, if unanswered, are potentially deceptive to millions of people. Some evangelicals are calling for a "softer," more "humble" approach to apologetics among Mormons; however, a strong "evidential apologetics" that clearly points to the evidence for Christianity and against Mormonism is the approach most consistent with Scripture. Mormons do not have to be convinced of the existence of God; discussions with Mormons must instead focus on questions about the nature of God and the number of gods. Four questions in particular can yield productive discussions with Mormons: Does the Bible allow for additional Mormon Scriptures? Is the creedal doctrine of the Trinity biblical? Can human beings progress to godhood? Is salvation accomplished wholly apart from human effort?

"Each person in a cult must be treated as an individual, and the Christian apologist should seek to know what makes a person tick rather than expect a 'one size fits all' solution."

WORLD RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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The Jehovah's Witnesses trace their origins to Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). Based on his teachings, the Watchtower Society today claims to be Jehovah's chosen people who are divided into the 144,000 and the Great Crowd. Their claim to be the exclusive children of God and their belief that the children of God are divided into two classes does not withstand the scrutiny of Scripture. In speaking with Jehovah's Witnesses, it is important to assume the role of questioner or student—not the role of teacher. Ask questions about specific biblical texts and specific teachings of the Watchtower Society.

Oneness Pentecostalism is a small branch of the Assemblies of God that denies the Trinity and suggests that Jesus is the one true God who manifested Himself in three different modes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Its followers believe that "Father" refers to Jesus' deity, "Son" to His humanity, and "Holy Spirit" to His presence and work among humankind. They base their theology on a number of ideas, including the biblical teaching that there is one God, the omission of the word *Trinity* from the Bible, and the assertion that the idea of the Trinity is rooted in paganism. An apologist familiar with Scripture can reveal the numerous weaknesses in this theological framework.

Witchcraft is a worldview that contains the following key ingredients: naturalism (the denial of any transcendent reality), occultism (the belief in a force or energy that one can engage and control to actualize one's own divinity), and humanism (the denial of any kind of sin or depravity in the human race). There are some ways in which witches and Christians are similar: both groups share concern for the environment, both tend to be kind and hospitable toward other persons, and both tend to be concerned about global needs.

However, Christians must be mindful of two dangers: the ways in which witchcraft can distort one's worldview, and the very real possibility of encountering the demonic realm. A Satanist is ***"one who believes the devil's lies and does the devil's work regardless of what deity she/he claims allegiance to."*** Although the number of practicing Satanists is very small and the much-hyped accounts of widespread satanic ritual abuse have been discredited, all of us are indwelt by sin and can fall prey to Satan's work.

Although the challenges presented by the growth of Islam are obvious and have received much attention, the challenges posed by Hinduism, Buddhism, New Ageism, and other belief systems that share the Hindu worldview are also significant. In fact, a good case can be made that the prevalence of the postmodern worldview was largely precipitated by the popularity of Hindu philosophy and spirituality. There is a pressing need for Christian churches and leaders to develop biblical responses to the Hindu ideas that are becoming increasingly attractive in America. Specifically, we must be careful that in our efforts to reach postmoderns, we don't make inappropriate concessions to Hindu ideology.



POSTSCRIPT:

A MANIFESTO for Christian APOLOGETICS

- 1) Apologetics involves making a persuasive case for the truth of the Christian faith.
- 2) Apologetics must not be denigrated in the Church.
- 3) Central to apologetics is a passion for God's truth and a love for lost people.
- 4) An apologist must make the development of a Christian worldview a lifetime intellectual pursuit.
- 5) The idea that reason or evidence plays no role in the Christian faith is unbiblical and harmful.
- 6) We must affirm the reality of objective, absolute, universal truth.
- 7) The work of the Holy Spirit must not be separated from the task of apologetics.
- 8) Humility and courage must pervade our apologetics.
- 9) We must always maintain intellectual credibility and excellence.
- 10) Evangelism and apologetics are intrinsically related.
- 11) Christian apologetics can also be helpful to Christians who struggle with doubt.
- 12) Pastors and teachers must never minimize the importance of apologetics.
- 13) All Christians are encouraged to request that teaching about apologetics be included in the life of their fellowship.
- 14) Every Christian educational institution and church should teach apologetics.

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POSTSCRIPT: A MANIFESTO FOR CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS
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- 15) Mission agencies should ensure that their missionaries are well-trained in apologetics.
- 16) Christian apologists should seek to offer their arguments in public venues.
- 17) All Christians should attempt to present reasons for their faith in all spheres of their private life.
- 18) Christian students should be encouraged to study disciplines that will enable them to become effective apologists.
- 19) All efforts in apologetics should be surrounded by much prayer.

“May we who are redeemed through the blood of the Lamb and who yearn to proclaim, explain, and defend the gospel of Jesus Christ take as our charge the apostle Paul’s rousing conclusion to his glorious exposition of the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (I Corinthians 15:58).*”



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