

INTRODUCTION

A STUDENT REPORTED to me recently that he had returned from a conference entitled “Defending the Faith.” When I asked him what the most significant thing about it was, I was surprised at his answer. He said the thing that most caught his attention was one speaker’s comments that went something like this: “This year our topic is apologetics,¹ so you really won’t need to have your Bibles with you.” The comment was not meant to be humorous or flippant; it was simply a statement of fact.

A comment like this is understandable, though lamentable. It is understandable, given the typical context and concerns of apologetics these days. Typically, the context of apologetics has been first of all philosophical. The vast majority of apologetic discussions have taken place within philosophical walls, using philosophical arguments, trying to reach philosophical conclusions. The language that has been used, the methods of argumentation, and the topics chosen for debate have been molded primarily by a philosophical agenda.

In some ways, this is understandable, perhaps even natural. There is, of course, an obvious overlap between apologetics and philosophy. Because philosophy seeks to ask and answer the

1. We will be looking more closely at the word *apologetics* in the chapters that follow. For now, we can summarize its meaning simply as “a defense of the Christian faith.”

“big” questions—What is the universe like? Who am I? How can I know anything? What is the nature of right and wrong?—its concerns are similar to some of the main concerns of the Christian faith. However, philosophy’s answers to these questions have often been antagonistic to Christian truth. So, in response, Christian apologists have attempted to give Christian answers to philosophical questions—often using terms that philosophers would use and understand.

This is not a bad thing in and of itself. If Christianity can provide answers (and it can) to some of the most sophisticated and perplexing problems of life and thought, then we ought to be happy, and eager, to engage the debate. Problems arise, however, when the philosophical concerns *determine* the very nature of apologetics. The problem is that apologetics has become a largely philosophical discipline. So, it is not surprising that this student would attend a conference on Christian apologetics and never open the Bible. In philosophy one needs strong reasoning skills, not revelation (or so we’re often told).

There is another reason for thinking that the Bible is not useful or needed in apologetics. It has to do with what is considered to be our *source* of truth. One of the ideas that has motivated apologists down through the centuries is that reason, not revelation, is the proper source of truth for apologetics. This is a controversial subject that cannot be settled here.

The basic approach of this position, however, has been to argue that there are areas of Christian truth—areas like the existence of God, the nature of the world, etc.—that are accessible to all of us, given the proper use of reason (proper assumptions and arguments). If these things are accessible to all of us, there is no immediate need to appeal to revelation for our dis-

cussion. We need only use our minds and appeal to universal principles—or to anything except revelation.

As a matter of fact, there is a strong and vocal tradition in apologetics that rejects any appeal to revelation when discussing apologetics. Such an appeal is thought to be illegitimate, in part, because the unbeliever does not accept biblical revelation at all. To appeal to biblical revelation as a part of our defense of the faith, then, would be to miss the concerns of the unbeliever altogether. What is needed, it is thought, is an appeal to what we all have in common. So, apologetics has been concerned, for the most part, to appeal to our “common” reason or our “common” principles of thought.

These trends have had a number of unfortunate effects. Most importantly, they have minimized the use of Scripture in apologetics. Of course, if reason is all we need to properly defend the faith, then the Bible need not concern us in that task (unlike, say, evangelism or preaching). But is reason all that we really need to defend the Christian faith?

The net effect of this notion, that reason is the proper context for apologetics, is that apologetics becomes more of a hobby for intellectuals than something of life-and-death significance. As a result, the discipline of apologetics is often seen to belong somewhere between art history and the Christian Doctors Association—interesting for some, but not relevant to most Christians. This view of apologetics extends even to institutions that train students for gospel ministry. Since apologetics is thought to be only marginally helpful to Christians, virtually every theological seminary that I know of places its courses in apologetics on the list of electives—unnecessary for ministry, but perhaps interesting to those who are so inclined.

But we should all be “so inclined.” The purpose of this book is to get us to open our Bibles again when we think about apologetics. Of course, if apologetics *is* a kind of “side dish” alongside the main course of Christian truth, then it might be proper not to depend on Scripture for any direct information. So one of the things that we will claim in chapter 1 is that apologetics is essential to our Christian lives; it is, in fact, required of every Christian.

That may sound overwhelming to some who have just been introduced to this subject. But there is no need to be intimidated. We will see that apologetics is, in its most basic form, simply the application of biblical truth to the concerns of the day. As an application of biblical truth, all Christians have what they need to do apologetics. If the Lord commands us to defend the faith once for all given to the saints, then he has given us what we need to fulfill that command.

In one sense, the entire Bible is an apologetic. It is given as God’s word. It comes to us as truth to tell us who God is and what he requires of us. Most of it comes into a “hostile” environment, an environment flooded with the effects of sin and rebellion. But because it comes as truth to a hostile world, it challenges the worldviews and opinions of those who would want to oppose its truth.

When the Bible begins with “In the beginning, God . . . ,” it is immediately giving us the most foundational of truths, but it is also confronting any view that seeks to deny this God. The history of redemption is also a history of revelation. God reveals himself to Adam in the garden. After the Fall, God’s revelation comes into the world through the prophets “at many times and in many ways” (Hebrews 1:1). It comes to challenge unbelief and to reveal the Lord’s will to those who trust him.

It comes, preeminently, in these last days, in his Son. Jesus Christ comes into the world *as the truth itself*, in order to preach repentance, since, with his coming, the kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 3:2).

The idea of repentance has a distinctly intellectual side to it. Of course, that does not make it coldly intellectualistic; repentance has much more to it than simply a change of mind. But its focus is on the mind. Repentance means, at least, that our mind-set must change with respect to a certain lifestyle or way of thinking. Repentance, as we will see, must be a part of our apologetic appeal. We dare not simply think that our responsibility in apologetics is to show that *some* deity might exist *somewhere*. Our responsibility is to tell the truth, the truth about Christianity, including the truth that God now “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). We seek and desire, in defending the faith, to see a change of mind in those to whom we speak.

If I were to summarize the next few chapters in a paragraph that would capture our responsibility to defend the faith, it would look something like this:

Since Christ is Lord, and the battle is his, we must always be ready to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We must use the weapons, not of this world, but of the Lord. We must take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ as we demolish the arguments, with gentleness and reverence, of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, worshiping created things, rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

As you read through this book, this statement will, I hope, take on new and clearer meaning for you.

As one who teaches apologetics in a seminary (where it is required for ministerial training), I am more convinced now than when I first began learning the subject as a new Christian that its emphasis is needed in our churches today. It is needed, not simply to give us “ammunition” against the enemy, though that is one of its purposes, but also to give us a biblical perspective on “every wind of doctrine” that blows our way in the stormy seas of our world. With the proper biblical preparation, we can be confident, not only that we, by God’s grace, have answers to give to those who ask, but that “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) is the only true and helpful response to those questions.

THE LORD’S BATTLE

Saul was convinced that David was too small and too young to go to battle, especially against a giant! He looked at the evidence, sized up the situation, and came to what appeared to be a logical conclusion. A young boy, he thought, is not capable of defeating a giant:

And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.”
(1 Samuel 17:33)

Almost anyone assessing the situation would have easily come to Saul’s conclusion. But he had missed a very important point. Sometimes the plans and purposes of God defy the obvious. David, unlike Saul, knew that this was just such a time.

It was true that David was inexperienced. He had never fought in a war, while Goliath was an accomplished warrior. But David remembered something that Saul had forgotten. He remembered that “the battle is the LORD’s” (1 Samuel 17:47), and that made all the difference.

If we think of apologetics as a spiritual continuation of David’s battle with Goliath, it may help us to see some important and encouraging truths as we seek to defend and commend the Christian faith. The first truth is simple, and it bears repeating time and time again: *The battle is the Lord’s*. There will come a time when the battle will be no more. The end of history will mark the end of the spiritual battle on earth. Until that time, however, the Lord will continue to use the likes of us in the war against the forces of darkness in the heavenly places.

This is a great privilege. But it can become terrifying, and we can easily despair of all hope if, like Saul, we forget just whose battle we are fighting. Because it is the Lord’s battle, to depend on our own strength or expertise would be folly. He is the Lord Sabaoth—the Lord of hosts—and he continues to command his army. His purpose in this command is to bring glory *to* himself by saving a people *for* himself. Since the battle is the Lord’s, it is to be waged in his way.

We must also remember that the Lord is the primary and all-powerful participant in this battle. He is the commander of his own army (Joshua 5:14). As such, he leads his people into battle, stays to fight along with them, and, in the end, assures victory.

What was behind Saul’s forgetfulness? Why did he forget whose battle he was in? The answer is that he allowed what was visible to overshadow what was invisible. He had taken on a worldly perspective. So he was defeated even before he began.

But David saw the invisible. He knew whose battle it was, and he knew his place in that battle.

There are three principles that David applied in his battle with Goliath that we should remember as we begin to think about apologetics. They have to do with the reason for the battle, its purpose, and its weapons. Some of these things will be discussed in the chapters that follow, but they should help us set our focus here.

(1) The *reason* David went out to face the giant was simple:

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” (1 Samuel 17:45)

David knew that the battle was not about him. He was not concerned to defend his own honor or his own reputation. As a matter of fact, David seems to have given no thought to himself at all. The reason he faced Goliath was that *Goliath had defied the Lord of hosts*. Goliath had issued a challenge to Israel. In that challenge, he was defying the armies of Israel (v. 10) and asserting himself and his power. He thought that he was greater and stronger than the armies of God. He continued his proud abuse for forty days (v. 16).

Saul and Israel were afraid of Goliath. But David saw Goliath’s challenge for what it was. It was not a challenge simply to Israel. It was more than that. In defying Israel’s armies, Goliath was defying the Commander of the armies as well. Goliath’s challenge was a challenge to the glory and power and honor of the Lord of hosts.

David was concerned for the glory of the Lord. He was not concerned to show that Israel was, in itself, stronger than the

Philistines. He was not concerned to display more strength than Goliath. He knew that Goliath's challenge went far beyond the Valley of Elah. It was a cosmic challenge. It was a challenge to the truth of Israel's God. It was primarily a challenge to the Truth himself.

When we seek to respond to challenges that come to us, challenges to the truth of Christianity, we should always remember that it is God's glory—his power and goodness and holiness and truth—that we are defending. Of course, God is perfectly capable of defending himself. Surely the only one who is all-powerful can better defend his honor than others whose power and goodness are severely limited. So why should we try to defend the glory and truth of God?

That is the mystery and the beauty of it all. The Lord of hosts has seen fit, in his own secret wisdom and providence, to use the likes of us to fight the cosmic battle. We have to admit that, from our own limited and sinful vantage point, this looks like trying to drain an ocean with a straw. But God's ways are perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4); whatever he does is right and true (Isaiah 45:19). His determination to use us in the cosmic fight fits perfectly with his perfect plan. It becomes, then, our privilege and honor to serve him in this way.

That is why David was quick to volunteer for the fight. It may just be that *because* David was the youngest, he was ready for battle. Being the youngest in a family in Israel normally meant being, in many ways, the least significant. Surely David had understood from an early age that his position in the family gave him the fewest family privileges. He was, in many ways, the weakest of all, and he was well aware of his weaknesses. In realizing his weaknesses, however, David could not have imagined that he had the power to fight with the armies of Israel. If

he was going to fight, it would have to be the Lord who would do battle through him.

So it is with us. If we ever think that we are capable, in and of ourselves, to fight the Lord's battle, we lose the battle altogether. The Lord uses the weak in the world to shame the strong; he uses the simple to confound the strong and mighty. He does that, as Paul reminds us, so that no one will have occasion to boast (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

David was willing to fight because his Lord had been challenged. Goliath's persistence in defying Israel's God was an act of cosmic rebellion. This was not about land or turf or a human kingdom. This was about God's rightful rule over his creation. Goliath had challenged that rule. David could not let the challenge go unanswered.

(2) David announced his *purpose* in this battle. He actually announced three related purposes. First, David answered Goliath's challenge, so "that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Samuel 17:46). How did David's response accomplish that purpose?

The answer to that question would have been obvious to anyone standing there that day. The only way that David could hope to defeat this giant warrior was if Someone more powerful was fighting with him. The odds against David were so great that only some kind of powerful intervention could save him. The natural conclusion to this confrontation was clear. It would take someone *supernatural* to overcome the natural. If David actually defeated Goliath, it would then be clear that there was a God in Israel.

In this battle, David was concerned to declare the knowledge of God throughout the world. As we will see, knowing God is a central and essential part of our defense. It has always been a goal of apologetics that people come to acknowledge him.

Discussions about God—what he has done, why we should believe in him, etc.—have been central in the history of apologetics at least since the early Middle Ages.

David's concern in this battle was to demonstrate that the God of Israel was the true God. Goliath had his gods, but he could not rely on them to fight his battles. Goliath was dependent on his own (almost superhuman) strength and power. David's God, the true God of Israel, would not have his people depend on themselves. If the battle was to be fought as the Lord's battle, then *his* strength and power had to be central. Any victory would reveal something of who this God was.

Second, David announced that he was fighting “that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves” (1 Samuel 17:47). The remarkable thing about this announcement was just how insignificant David saw himself to be in this battle. While being confident of victory, he was just as sure that it was the Lord who would achieve that victory. The Lord, and he alone, saves his people.

This does not mean, of course, that the Lord would have conquered Goliath if David had not gone out against him. The Lord could have won without David, but he chose instead to give David the privilege of being an instrument in the victory.

So it is with our apologetic battles. The Lord could save people, he could draw each and every one to himself, without any effort from us. But he has decided not to work that way (see Romans 10). The important point, however, is that we should see ourselves as David saw himself in this battle. Whatever salvation may come through our efforts, *it is the Lord who saves*. Notice, David did not say that he and the Lord would save Israel. He did not view this as a cooperative effort. David knew who alone has the power to save, and he gave credit where credit

was due. He gave glory where it belonged. All glory goes to God alone in salvation.

Third, David did not simply acknowledge that the Lord saves. Rather, he declared *how* he saves as well: “that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear” (1 Samuel 17:47). Why was it important for David that the Lord does not save with sword or spear? Was he simply implying that the Lord uses slingshots instead of spears? Is the point that the Lord’s weapons are smaller?

(3) This brings us to the principle regarding David’s *weapons* in his battle with Goliath: The Lord does not use the weapons of battle at all to save his people. The Lord’s battle is a battle for people. It is not a war over turf. He is not concerned simply to give his people more land. He is concerned to own *them*, to redeem them, to buy them back. With that concern, swords and spears are ineffective. What is needed in the Lord’s battle are weapons that will cause people to bow down, to bend the knee and acknowledge that the Lord, and he alone, is God. Only supernatural weapons can accomplish that task.

This does not mean, as we saw above, that the Lord uses *no* means, or weapons, to accomplish his purposes. Although he could have stopped Goliath’s heart without David, he chose to use David and his sling. He chose the weak and simple things so that those who relied on what they thought to be powerful and mighty things would be put to shame.

We may be called on by God to battle experienced warriors as we defend and commend the faith. We may be brought into situations where we are weak and frail, though our opponent is strong and mighty (at least by the world’s standards). That seems to be exactly the kind of situation in which the Lord likes to show forth his power and glory.

Of course, if it is the Lord's battle, there will never be a time when we will meet someone who is more powerful or more able. Because the Lord is the commander, anyone with whom we speak will be weak and frail by comparison.

We need David's perspective as we think about defending the faith. We must have David's *faith* if we are going to do battle at all. We will not use the weapons of the world. We will fight, if we fight the Lord's battle, with his weapons. And the chief weapon that he has given to us is his sword, the Word of God itself.

We must disagree with that conference speaker. The Bible should be central to any discussion of apologetics. It is the Bible that we need, and must open, if we are going to think about apologetics and begin to prepare to do it. To fight the Lord's battle without the Lord's sword is foolishness. To fail to use the only weapon that is able to pierce to the heart, is to fight a losing battle. The following chapters are meant to help us see what "God's sword," his Word, says about fighting his battles. Without that Word, our fight will be in vain. With it, however, we may be assured of pleasing him (and therefore of achieving "success") as we fight.

Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King's own army none can overthrow:
Round his standard ranging, vict'ry is secure;
For his truth unchanging makes the triumph sure.
Joyfully enlisting by thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side, Savior, we are thine.

(Frances R. Havergal)

"For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand"
(1 Samuel 17:47).