

LECTURE 10: CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS SINCE THE REFORMATION

Selected notes on apologists since the Reformation

This period contains many apologetic works. Here follow a few comments on selected apologists and their works.

John Calvin

A.D. 1509-1564

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is dedicated to Francis I of France, and is in reality an apologetic work describing the beliefs of the Protestants and an appeal for their toleration by the state. In that sense it is in the tradition of Luke-Acts and of the second century apologists.

Joseph Butler

A.D. 1692-1752

Bishop of Durham. Butler's *The Analogy of Religion* was a defense to stem the tide of deism and skepticism sweeping over England and the Continent. He relied heavily on reason and evidentialism, showing that no one can prove Christianity false. For Butler "probability is the guide of life." Revealed religion in the Bible is analogous to natural revelation (which deists accepted). Both have difficulties, but agree in what they teach.

William Paley

A.D. 1743-1805

Paley's *View of the Evidences of Christianity* and his *Natural Theology* provide the definitive statement of the classical teleological argument. Various areas of the creation show the hand of an intelligent creator, and cannot be accounted for by mere chance. For over a century was required reading for all English college students (Darwin read Paley's *Evidences* as a requirement in college!). He produced the famous watchmaker argument; modern atheist Richard Dawkins attacked it in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986); the watchmaker argument is now being refined in the Intelligent Design movement.

Nineteenth century apologists

During the 1800s four major attacks against the Bible each produced a reaction from Christian apologists and biblical scholars: Darwinian evolution, Marxism, Freudianism, and destructive biblical criticism (“higher criticism”). Many Christian apologists arose to challenge these movements; many defenders of orthodox Christianity have risen up to continue this effort to the present day.

In general the many apologetic writings of the nineteenth century followed the lines set out by Butler and Paley. Prominent Christian apologists included George Park Fisher, Alexander Balmain Bruce, James Orr, and William Henry Green.

Twentieth century apologists

The beginning of the century saw increasing attacks from the area of biblical criticism, answered by many biblical scholars (e.g., Robert Dick Wilson, Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield). Likewise, the increasing attack from Modernism led to many works defending classic Fundamentalism (e.g., publication of *The Fundamentals* in the 1920’s; John Gresham Machen’s *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, *Christianity and Liberalism*, *What Is Faith?*, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*).

Much of the American New Evangelical movement was designed to make Christianity more understandable and respected in scholarly circles in our increasingly non-Christian world. These writers came from a background in Fundamentalism, but believed the Fundamentalists were failing by their ecclesiastical separatism and their excessive dogmatism and intolerant attitudes toward their opponents. Leading apologists in this tradition include Edward John Carnell and Bernard Ramm. Older writers in this school tried to uphold biblical inerrancy, while more modern writers generally try to uphold spiritual reliability. Often these scholars are not dogmatic in such areas as evolution vs. creation.

British biblical apologists, as F. F. Bruce and modern Intervarsity Press writers, often take a more moderating position, basing conclusions not on dogmatic teachings, but on the results of historical or literary investigations. These results, for example, will often assert general biblical accuracy, but not biblical inerrancy.

One British apologist who has achieved great fame is Clive Staples Lewis, who was not a trained theologian, but rather a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature. Lewis’s many works (e.g., *God in the Dock*, *Surprised by Joy*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Abolition of Man*, the Narnia series, and the Space Trilogy) have an apologetic purpose, seeking to make basic Christianity understandable and applicable to modern “secular” society.

Schools of apologists moving into the twenty-first century

Many twentieth-century apologists have continued their work in the new century, and other, younger, apologists have arisen as well.

Modern American apologists who follow the traditional or evidentialist school include John Warwick Montgomery, Gordon R. Lewis, Josh McDowell, Norman Geisler, John H. Gerstner, Hugh Ross, and Robert Newman. Some Reformed theologians have joined in this effort, such as Reformed evidentialist Michael Horton.

A small but influential school among reformed Christians is the presuppositional school led by Cornelius Van Til and his followers (for recent developments in the thought of Van Til's disciples, see articles in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 57:1 [Spring, 1995]; this issue marks the centennial of his birth [5/3/1895]). John Frame, one of his more prominent disciples, has developed his own mediating position.

A more logically consistent, some would say rationalistic, presentation of presuppositionalism is provided by Christian philosopher Gordon H. Clark, whose works were promoted by John Robbins and others. The modern Reconstructionist movement favors a presuppositional apologetic.

Francis A. Schaeffer (e.g., *The God Who Is There*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*) took a moderating position, requiring a philosophical "pre-evangelism." Many follow this position today.

Reformed Christians have made great headway in influencing the teaching of philosophy in the universities. Foremost among them is Alvin Platinga, who has developed impressive arguments defending the existence of God and the feasibility of belief in God within the philosophical disciplines.

Historical apologetics is continuing with strong support from American and British scholars. For example, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona (Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus* [2010]) have done extensive work defending the historicity of Jesus' physical resurrection. British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has lent considerable support to showing evidence for Christ's resurrection (*The Resurrection of the Son of God* [2003]).

Another apologist school is very active at the present time: the creation-science movement, which seeks to demonstrate scientifically as well as scripturally that the universe is a recent creation of God, depending heavily on flood geology. This movement includes Henry M. Morris and the Creation Research Society (<http://www.creationresearch.org>), and Ken Ham and the Answers in Genesis organization (<http://www.answersingenesis.org>); it is gaining strength through its school accrediting agency (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools). An older evangelical scientific organization, the American Scientific Affiliation (<http://www.asa3.org>), generally supports an old age for the universe, with a variety of opinions regarding theistic evolution. The Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute (<http://www.ibri.org>), led by Robert C. Newman, and the organization Reasons to Believe (<http://www.reasons.org>), headed by Hugh Ross favor an old age for the universe but oppose theistic evolution.

A growing modern apologist movement is the Intelligent Design ("ID") movement. Led by legal scholar Phillip Johnson (*The Wedge of Truth*), it enlists information and communication theory and the scientific parameters of intelligent design (mathematician and philosopher William Dembski [*Intelligent Design*, and *The Design Inference*]) to such phenomena as irreducible complexity in elementary biological systems (molecular biologist Michael Behe [*Darwin's Black Box* and *The Edge of Evolution*]) and biologist Michael Denton [*Nature's Destiny*, and *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*]). Philosopher and theologian

William Lane Craig writes extensively about the nature of time and the need for a Creator (*Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time, Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*). Typical websites include the Discovery Institute (www.discovery.org) and the Access Research Network (www.arn.org). This movement does not seek to identify the “designer,” but seeks merely to demonstrate that there must be a designer, that mere chance cannot explain the information we see in DNA and other systems. Because of this limited objective, the movement finds supporters from both recent-creationists and old-earth creationists, as well as from some non-Christians. The ID movement uses books, journals, web sites, and university appearances to deliver its message, and has been quite effective.