

Theoretical Applications of Modern Apologetics: Internal and External Applications

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Abstract

The theological field of Christian apologetics has a long and storied history. Due in part to that history and recent interpretations and applications, the field has become detailed and complex to the point that many cannot understand or apply apologetics in the world today effectively. This paper proposes dividing the field into two specific areas, internal and external apologetics, for more clarity around education and application of the field and process. “Internal” would apply to individuals already on the “inside” of the Christian faith; while “external” would be applied to those who are not active Christians.

Keywords

Christian apologetics; theology; education; apologetics; modern apologetics; Christianity

Introduction

Theological discussions related to the source, meaning, and use of apologetics has continued nearly constantly since the time after Jesus’ death. The field of apologetics in Christianity has changed over the years and expanded to almost have no meaning due to the inclusion of all possible aspects and applications of apologetics. Some consider it defense, others witness, others strictly theological. This research proposes working through the theological aspects to separate apologetics into portions for applications, particularly for educators: one branch and application towards non-believers for use with witnessing and defending the faith; and a second branch and application towards believers to help support the believers and prepare them to help witness to others and educate the people of the faith.

Original/Ancient Apologetic Applications and Styles

Some original apologetics will trace the origin of apologetics to the call in 1 Peter (Nicolson 2024, 97). This was a very general concept of apologetics, looking for Christians to be prepared to respond when questioned about their faith. 1 Peter 3:15 says, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:” (King James version). This call from Peter has driven a good portion of the concept of apologetics throughout the ages. It is a reasonable call,

and few Christians or theologians oppose that point: nearly all agree that people of faith should be able to give a reason for their faith. Apologetic educators and researchers will refer to this verse and call as their starting point for Christian apologetics.

Early Christian apologetics was focused around changing the world and describing Jesus Christ to the world that did not know Him (Jovanović 2024, 196). This was really an attempt to get the world to understand the idea and concept of Jesus Christ. No one before had ever come to earth, died, and been resurrected for the sins of the world. The concept was new and difficult to understand, so a good deal of focus was on finding ways to introduce these concepts to the world and the people of the world. While this concept is known and understood today, the audience of the world has changed substantially.

In the seventeenth century, most theologians had few questions related to the resurrection of Jesus (Allison 2021, 749). They did not feel the need to defend the event of the resurrection, as they simply accepted it. During the renaissance Humanism experienced a revival, which led to more questions around Christianity and the need for more logical defenses of the faith (Edgar and Oliphint 2011, 26). This created a need for apologetics related to discussions and witnessing for Christianity more than ever before.

Modern Apologetic Applications and Styles

Apologetics often differentiates between original apologetics from the first century and their focus in modern times based on church doctrine instead of application (Nicolson 2023, 4). This is where different denominations or different divisions of churches work to define what apologetics means to their people and their church. This is a customized meaning, focusing on the needs of that particular church or people group at the time. These sorts of differentiations work well for the churches and people for which they are specified, but they fail to provide a wider, more useful meaning and application of the theological aspects of apologetics.

Modern apologetics can be used as a method of witness for the church (Tomlin 2023, 518). While some church doctrines move in this direction, in general apologetics does not focus on using apologetics as a witness. Instead, many apologists often focus on just the defense of the faith, and one can only defend when they are attacked. While this can be an effective witness for the faith, this method of apologetics is seldom used intentionally to attempt to witness to unbelievers. There are exceptions, such as C. S. Lewis, Fulton Sheen, and others, that do work to use apologetics to follow the message of 1 Peter quite effectively. Still, as even many inside Christianity feel, apologetics may simply be an attempt to argue and “win” an argument.

Other modern apologetics focuses on Christ’s love to use as evidence for faith (Wetsah 2021, 464). Many modern churches focus primarily on Christ’s love for all that they do. While this is certainly a good and useful tactic, this may not be the most effective use of apologetics. When teaching anything related to the New Testament, Christ’s love will certainly be a part of that teaching. However, attempting to only use Christ’s love as apologetics is a method that does not make effective use of all the aspects available to the educator or Christian when speaking of apologetics and all that may be part of apologetics.

Arguments today around apologetics can focus on topics such as creationism (Talbot 2021, 80). While apologetics can work through issues from many angles, the discipline needs to have more focus and support rather than simply being a way to argue a point. Apologetics needs to expand beyond argumentation and into wider topics and support. As it expands, it also needs to narrow the focus. It can be difficult for an apologetics educator today to expand knowledge of the field and topic when only focused on single, narrow events or specific theology. At the same time, all aspects of theology can be incorporated into apologetics effectively if done with preparation and thought and consideration of the purpose of apologetics.

Modern apologists often focus on deep theological questions such as the existence of God when trying to defend the faith to non-believers (Kirby 2021, 410). Some advanced apologetics educational programs also spend a substantial amount of time on these types of questions to engage apologetics in the defense of theological questions that have deep and difficult answers. However, this should be just one aspect of apologetics, not the central focus. This application of apologetics can be useful for theologians who are working on academic research and talking to other theologians, but there is little application of this depth of apologetics to the individual Christian or to the non-believer. These are certainly very important questions that demand answers, but they remain only a small portion of the wide arena that is defined as apologetics and apologetic education today.

Apologetics in the modern world can often lean towards trying to answer if the worldview of the Christian is a rational position (Groothuis 2011, 55). This can often lead to discussions around rationality and philosophical questions around thinking and thought. There are times for discussions of the philosophy of religion, rationality, and human thinking; but there are also times for discussions around the truth of Christ and the goodness of God.

Potential Apologetic Applications and Styles

The 21st century has seen a rise in movements and theologies related to atheism (Dabetić 2021, 29). This helps illustrate the need for Christian evangelism and for training for these evangelists. This can be applied to those who are learning about their own faith, those who are witnessing in their communities, and those who move outward on mission trips to spread the Gospel to other people groups and other lands. But without clear preparation, and indeed, education in apologetics, these people will be faced with questions in the field that they cannot answer.

Apologetics can be, and has been, taught and used many ways in modern Christian society. Apologetics can be used to present the meaning of faith to the non-believer (Markus and van den Toren 2024, 81). This can be a strong witness for Christians who are engaged in such activity. While Christians can witness by using traditional methods such as “The Romans Road,” (a sequence of verses in Romans that are used to show the path to salvation) they should also be prepared to answer questions and defend their faith from attacks. When potential Christians ask questions, training in apologetics is the preparation that the Christian can have to engage fully in witnessing. Without this preparation and training, the witness may fall short.

While evangelical Christians today are often excited about trying to share the gospel and share their faith, they do not often see the practical relevance of theological apologetics (Johnson 2024, 168). This is certainly an issue, a barrier, and a topic that can be advanced and addressed by apologetic education. With apologetics being such a large field and area of study, it can be very difficult to attempt to address this with standard modern apologetics education today. If Christians cannot see the use, they will likely not accept the teaching education around apologetics.

The overall message of today's apologist is the Bible (Frame and Torres 2015, 42). This is often the same apparent message of the Christian missionary. However, today's typical Christian does not enter their mission field prepared with the specific knowledge of apologetics.

Apologetic Education: Internal and External Preparation

This paper proposes that apologetics education formally adjust and change to intentionally focus on two divisions of apologetics: internal and external. This intentional delineation and separation will allow educators to more effectively teach apologetics to receptive audiences. It will also allow Christian apologists to more clearly understand the uses and purposes around apologetics, no matter their role or part as a Christian.

The internal division of apologetics would be focused on Christians inside the church. This would focus on the uses and understandings of the faith and defending the faith for those who are already professing Christians. This type of teaching could be for Sunday School classes or other educational opportunities that involve the church and the people of the church. The primary focus here is around Christians understanding their own faith and being able to strengthen their own faith from the inside. The goal for this type of teaching and apologetics is to make Christians more confident in their own faith and understanding.

This process and education would not be simple catechesis, but a more complicated, detailed, and planned process to prepare believers to be able to more effectively discuss their faith. With this education, they could answer questions, defend the faith, and more effectively witness when they are asked about Christianity and the Bible. This would allow the Christian to expand, explore, and strength their own faith as well.

The external division of apologetics would be focused on those who are not professing Christians. While the teaching here will again be for Christians, the focus here is around educating Christians in how to defend their faith against questions and those who are outside the church. This would be useful for Christians who desire to witness and discuss their faith with others who do not understand it. These Christians would be trained how to answer questions and understand apologetics in ways that will allow them to increase education about the Christian church to those outside the church.

This definition of an internal apologetics process will serve to help fill a need that has not clearly been identified. Christians today often attend their churches, read their Bible, and sometimes attend Sunday school with the primary goal of increasing their relationship with God. There is nothing wrong with building that relationship, of course. But when Christians interact with non-Christians to explain their faith; their witness would be much stronger if they

were equipped with the knowledge of apologetics and how to apply that in instances where they are encountering non-Christians and witnessing to others.

Conclusion

Christian apologetics has a long history. It has been used in different ways over time and has expanded to a topic area that includes large amounts of information, history, styles, and applications. The topic area has become so large that educators and people who use, or should use, apologetics do not completely understand the uses and applications of the theological field. By dividing the topic field into separate areas, internal and external, educators and others can see the clear delineations of the topic and will be able to more effectively teach, use, and understand this complex area of knowledge.

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