

## APOLOGETICS AS INTERPERSONAL (Promoting and Defending the Faith)

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Interpersonalism characterizes the defense of the Christian faith in three ways. **First** is its need-answer-use that persons have for what Christianity offers. Apologetics—the defense of the faith—takes place in a reciprocating pattern around three poles: (1) a person’s present sense of need, (2) the conceptual and past historical basis for answering that need, and (3) the present verification through experience of the behavioral and existential correlates in that answer. The verification by experience can come back around to qualify present perception of need and to assist in the awareness of what scripture means by what it says. The process incorporates a need-answer-use triangular format that can move back and forth as well as begin at any one of the three poles.

Within that arrangement of aspects, people’s present sense of need includes (a) the desire to be loved, (b) the drive for meaningfulness, (c) the need for security, and (d) the desire for innocence. These needs operate in the interpersonal realm. Love occurs between persons and has ties to the sense of meaningfulness and the need for security. A person’s sense of meaning comes best from positive social relations. That meaningless, “empty” feeling people experience can only be filled by friendship, which ultimately has to involve friendship with God. A sense of security derives from being able to depend on significant others. Innocence deals with guilt, which applies only to interpersonal situations and is intensified by the gaze of other persons who know we have sinned. Guilt is removed by interpersonal processes. Christian apologetics correlates nicely with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Apologetics best takes place in the interpersonal context. It can capitalize on the drawing power of love. Christianity is not proved syllogistically but historically and relationally, not ideally but really. People’s coming to faith is affected by the love and concern of its witnesses in concert with their testimony. 1 Peter 3:1-2 observes something of this point when encouraging wives to defer to their unbelieving husbands. They might win them by the chaste and respectful behavior (cp. 1 Corinthians 7:16?). So, when people convert and begin (3) to live out (2) the gospel given to answer their (1) needs, they themselves become part of the apologetic system for Christianity. They occupy a position in station #3 in the need-answer-use interacting format. “Demonstration evangelism” grows out of Christian apologetics.

**Second** is the kind of defense of the faith illustrated in Gamaliel’s speech to the Sanhedrin. Acts 5:33-42 amounts to an argument for Christ’s resurrection. Gamaliel warns

against executing the apostles because the Sanhedrin might be fighting against God. Noting that since Theudas and Judas had been killed and their movements disintegrated, the rabbi advised the religious leaders to put the apostles forth for a while. If the movement they were leading was not from God, it would be overthrown too.

Gamaliel's point goes beyond the questionable, yet interesting, proposition that that sin tends to self-destruct or what lasts is true. He was talking about a specific kind of situation—the Messianic situation. Judas and Theudas had presumably been claiming to be the Messiah like Jesus did; but when Jesus was killed, his movement did not disintegrate, as a person would expect. Instead, it was growing under the enthusiastic leadership of these commoners standing in front of the council. Their claim that Jesus had resurrected could explain the growth rather than the extinction of Jesus' followers. Before the time of his supposed resurrection, the disciples had followed the typical pattern of fear, but afterward they became bold to the point of willingness to suffer death rather than deny him.

The Messianic kingdom is a universal eternal kingdom. The general populace in Israel understood that "*Messiah abides forever*" (John 12:34; Matthew 26:35; cp. 16:13-18), a belief derived from Old Testament texts like Psalm 11:4; Isaiah 9:7; Ezekiel 37:25; and Daniel 7:14. That concept explains somewhat the incredible behavior of the mockers at the cross. Since they were being successful in killing Jesus, he could not be the Messiah (Matthew 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35).

Coupled with the notion of an eternal Messiah is the crucial fact that the Messianic kingdom was a person-centered system. It was not an ideology-centered system because Messiah was not just the founder of the religion that bears his name. He himself serves as the center of it. When the center of any system is removed, the system collapses. An ideology-centered system dissipates if the central concept is removed (by being shown false). If the person is removed from a person-centered system (by being discredited or killed), that movement falls apart too. Communism or Buddhism is an ideology-centered system; so the death of its founders did not affect the progress of its expansion. But Christianity is a person-centered system that calls people to identify with, and commit to, the Messiah. Christianity is an interpersonal system that must be true as guaranteed by the resurrection. Without that miraculous event to keep him among his people, Christianity could not have originated among a resistant people that believed Messiah would abide forever.

**Third**, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's argument for Christ's resurrection comes down to the fact that people will not give their lives for what they know is false.

If there is no resurrection, Christ has not risen (15:13).

If Christ has not risen, the apostles were false witnesses (15:15).

If they were false witnesses, why were they willing to suffer to the point of death (15:19-34)?

*“A man will give everything he has for his life,”* Satan said (Job 2:4). The apostles were suffering for what they preached, and they were deriving no personal gain from it—no money, no political clout, and little prestige.

**Fourth**, in addition, the apostles experienced all these deprivations because they were trying to promote a message calling for a high moral standard for people. The question is whether they could behaviorally have been false witnesses. Paul seems not to have entertained the possibility that they were deluded; so they were either false or true witnesses. Paul even deliberately connects resurrection with moral behavior of persons (15:29-34). This whole argument for the resurrection—and hence the truth of Christianity that depends so significantly on it—rests on a pre-understanding about persons and their relationship to one another.

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