

## **APOLOGETICS 101: DEFINITION**

### ***The Application of Scripture to Unbelief***

The meaning of the term apologetics is usually defined as “the defense of the faith,” but this is too narrow and not supported biblically or in practice. In reality, there is a threefold meaning of the concept and practice of apologetics.

First, *apologia* and its derivatives, narrowly defined, appear nineteen times in the New Testament. It means literally “to talk oneself off a charge” or “to defend oneself.” (*Apologia* was a secular, legal term.) In most instances *apologia* (noun and verb forms) refers to a Christian’s response to legal prosecution, religious persecution, accusation or inquiry. The word is rendered in the English Standard Version as defense, make a defense, argue in defense, how to answer, and clear yourself (other versions: answer, excuse, or explanation). The New Testament provides examples from various litigious settings before Jews, Christians, and Gentiles. Part of apologetics is defending our faith and worldview by providing answers to unbelievers and opponents.

Second, there are two uses of *anapologia*, “without a defense,” that refer to mankind’s self-apologetic before God and His covenant lawsuit against unrighteous mankind (Rom 1:20, 2:1; similar term in 3:9). Human beings, however, typically put God on trial and presume Him culpable for malfunction and misfortune on earth. Part of apologetics is to “turn the tables” and demonstrate that human beings are literally “without an excuse” in God’s courtroom (Rom 1:20; see also 2:1-11). C. S. Lewis wrote:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the God who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.

Third, the practice of apologetic engagement in Acts is broader than the narrow definition (defense). This is evidenced by Paul’s polemic vocabulary against unbelievers and opponents: confound, refute, dispute, convince, win over, prove, debate, argue, dissent, discuss, allege, persuade, explain, and point out. These terms are modified by boldly, sharp, vigorously, and fearlessly, which indicate rhetorical passion within the context of disputation and evangelism.

Acts and Romans 1-2 present Paul as God’s New Testament covenant prosecutor against idolatry and unbelief (i.e. epistemic autonomy, playing God). Part of apologetics is offensive through refutation and internal critique of another’s worldview in order to demonstrate its intellectual and existential implausibility (See Proverbs 26:4-5). Cornelius Van Til wrote:

All sinners are covenant breakers. They have an axe to grind. They do not want to keep God in remembrance. They keep under the knowledge that is within them. That is, they try as best they can to keep under this knowledge for fear that they should look into the face of their judge. And since God’s face appears in every fact of the universe, they oppose God’s revelation everywhere. They do not want to see the facts of nature for what they are; they do not want to see themselves for what they are. Therefore, they assume the non-createdness of themselves and of the facts and the laws of nature round about them.

For all these reasons, a more useful definition of apologetics is provided by John Frame: apologetics is “the application of scripture to unbelief.”

Two other viable terms are elenctics (John 8:9; 16:8, 2Tim 4:2), derived from the Greek term, *elegcho* (prove, convict, critique, censure, correction, bring to light, expose) or the term, polemics.