

Apologetics 101 Primer

Introduction

Welcome to the apologetics 101 primer! A primer is an introductory book on a subject. The goal of this booklet is to assist you in obeying the command that Jesus called, “the first and greatest command”—loving the LORD with our entire being. God’s children are to love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Matt. 22:37).

The modern evangelical church excels in many ways in leading believers to love God with their hearts. However, we often neglect the command to love God with all of our *minds*! We are not to be “heart-only” disciples of Jesus. The goal of this project (and this site in general) is to help restore a bit of balance. Clearly, we do not have to choose between loving God with our hearts and loving Him with our minds. The first and greatest command instructs us to do both.

This primer will serve as a launching pad for thinking clearly about who God is and what He has done. We will briefly survey three overarching themes: (1) There is a God (Atheism is false); (2) God has spoken to us directly through the Bible; and (3) Jesus Christ is the only way to have a right relationship with God. The culminating point of our survey of Christian apologetics will focus on the case for the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Together, we will see how Christianity is a most reasonable faith, because God has furnished direct proof for Christianity by raising Christ from the dead!

The nature of a primer is to introduce fundamental ideas within an area of study or investigation. As such, you sometimes feel like we’re only “scratching the surface”. That is by design. The goal is to keep things concise and (especially) to encourage questions and discussion. Along the way, I’ll provide some example questions that can be used for small group discussions.

I also encourage you to come up with some of your own! I have discovered that conversational role playing is helpful (and a lot of fun) in teaching apologetics. I encourage you to do this! For example, at the end of a unit, divide into pairs and take turns playing the “devil’s advocate” while the other partner uses Scripture, evidence, and reason to respond, “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15), to the “skeptic’s” questions.

Most of the content here comes from my recollections “off the top of my head”. It is derived mainly from hundreds of conversations with believers (encouraging them) and unbelievers (persuading them) over the past several years on college campuses and street corners across America. My responses have been influenced, to varying degrees, by apologetics readings, including materials assigned during the completion of my master’s in Christian Apologetics through Luther Rice Seminary and University. I also have picked up many great answers, tactics, strategies and “rejoinder” questions through extensive work with several brothers in Christ, including Tom Short, David Holt, Ken Dornhecker, Alex Burt, Peter Salas, Bobby McCreery, Chike Uzuegbunam, Ryan Cavanaugh, Alex Glennon, and several others.

The goal here is not to publish a formal academic work, and specific references/quotes are kept to a minimum. The rest of the material has been shaped by myriad sources, so please understand that I make no claims regarding the originality of most of what I write here, nor have I deliberately attempted to represent anyone else’s ideas as my own. If you find something here that you think should note a specific source, please bring that to my attention, and I’ll research and edit the text as needed.

-Soli Deo Gloria

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Preface: What Everybody Already Knows

Allow me to begin with an audacious claim. Here it is: “God exists, and everyone already knows that”.

During the 2010’s, the insurance company GEICO featured a series of humorous “Did you know” commercials. One person would see a sign or ad and read it out loud, “Fifteen minutes could save you 15% or more on car insurance”, and the other person would then dismissively respond with, “Everyone knows that”. The first person would then proceed to cite some obscure piece of “trivia” (e.g., “Well, did you know that Old McDonald was a really bad speller?”)

Those GEICO commercials make for a good, innocent chuckle. After seeing one recently, I thought to myself, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if people were all so unanimous in stating the obvious in conversations about God?” You’re walking with your friend on the way to class, taking in the bright, sunny day, the flowers, the trees, the scenes and sounds of nature. “Ah! What a beautiful day! There must be a loving Creator God who designed and maintains all of this!” To which your friend responds, “Yeah, well, everyone knows that!”

Your friend would be absolutely right. Everyone *does* know it, “because God has made it plain to them” (Romans 1:19). The evidence is so overwhelming and undeniable that anyone who attempts to deny it is “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). The psalmist points to the evidence in the skies above, robust, vivid, and undeniable evidence for the Creator that everyone can see. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day after day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge” (Psalm 19:1,2).

The evidence is so abundant and so convincing that King Solomon, the wisest man (apart from Jesus) ever to live, says that it is only a fool who would say *in his heart* that there is no God. Notice that Solomon does not claim that the claim is made in the mind of this fool. Rather, it is made in his heart. Why is this significant? Because the heart of every man and every woman knows better! The only way people end up claiming to be atheists (or even agnostics for that matter) is through “suppressing the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18).

In other words, it is a person’s slavery to sin—his or her unrighteousness—that leads to a profession of disbelief in God. Of course, the atheist is quick to object!

At this point, the rationalizations begin: “I don’t believe in God; I believe in science!”; “I can’t believe in a God that would send people to hell unless they follow this one particular system of religion”; “If your God was real, kids in Africa wouldn’t be starving to death or dying from AIDS”; “You just believe that because you were brought up by religious parents”. The list goes on and on.

Please don’t get me wrong here. I am not claiming that atheists have not convinced themselves on some level that they don’t believe in God. Rather, my claim is that they are living a contradiction. We’ll revisit this later in detail, but this same God they deny, they end up tacitly acknowledging every time they appeal to a fixed moral standard or even to the laws of logic. Their foolish hearts (that is, their innermost beings/selves) are darkened (Romans 1:21). Those who deny God are confused and crackbrained, and they are bereft of a coherent system for knowing themselves or the world around them.

That’s what sin will do to the human heart. The sinful human heart is not wise (although it is usually convinced of its own “wisdom”). It is not reasonable. It is not rational. It is not objective. Here is how the Word of God characterizes the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

Notice the rhetorical question at the end of Jeremiah 17:9: “Who can understand it?” The implied answer, of course, is “no one”. No human being can understand it. The compass we use to navigate our cognitive world is broken. It does not naturally point to objective, transcendent truth. On occasions when it does brush past “true north”, it does not lock in. It is shifted and spun around and knocked off course by biases we’re not even aware of and predilections that we have no hope, in ourselves, utilizing even the most brilliant minds and methods, of correcting.

Consider proverbs, fables, parable, and so forth that originate from non-Judeo-Christian worldviews. (In a similar vein, we could also consider “epistemic” tools like the empirical or scientific method here.) Clearly, true things have been said about nature and about the human condition from sources other than those that are expressly based on the Christian Scriptures. The problem isn’t that nothing true can ever be said by any source outside of the Bible. The problem is that due to the entrenched biases of non-Biblical thinkers, those truths will be mixed and

muddled with bad ideas. Consequently, those isolated “islands” of truth will be of little use in leading one to a knowledge of ultimate Truth (capital-T Truth), which must be defined by an eternal, transcendent Creator.

Scripture makes it clear that the well—the fountainhead of natural human thinking and reasoning—has been poisoned by sin. Theologians refer to this as the *noetic* effects of sin. The word “noetic” refers to the intellect or to mental activity. This is precisely why God, aware of our fallen condition, has given us Scripture.

It is for this exact reason that God’s Word is the only sure guide for correcting our thinking, for righting our wayward, biased, proud, sin-loving, self-exulting human hearts and minds. Only the Word of God is “living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit...discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). What man’s sin has corrupted in the natural realm can be remedied only by that which has been breathed-out by God (2 Timothy 3:16) in the spiritual realm. The only certain guide for the human mind and heart is the Word of God!

Certain brothers in Christ who are very dear to me, if I understand them correctly, take all of this to mean that Scriptures are the only proper source material for apologetics. (I hope these precious friends will take the time to read this primer and offer feedback.) In other words, our apologetics should just be Scripture. This perspective on apologetics is most often endorsed by those in what has been called the “presuppositional apologetics” camp.

I find great value in studying and employing presuppositional arguments. I do not dispute this emphasis on the primacy and preeminence of Scripture. In my own teaching and preaching ministry, I try to always make sure that God gets the first and last word, because, ultimately, only His Word is eternal. However, I have found utility in other approaches to apologetics, including classical, evidential, and even experiential methods. As such, I take a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” approach.

In the body of this primer, I will be making the case for traditional, Biblical Christianity mostly on classical and evidential grounds. I then include a short introduction to presuppositional apologetics in a separate chapter (Chapter 4) before discussing “apologetics in action” in Chapter 5. Before reading further,

take a moment to pray: “Father, thank you for revealing truth to us. Thank you for making yourself known through creation and through Your Word. We ask the Spirit of Holiness to fill us as we seek to love you with all of our minds, to the eternal glory of Jesus Christ. In His holy name, Amen.”

Questions to Consider:

What are some ways that the “noetic” effects of sin cloud and muddle our thinking?

What are some specific ways in which God’s Word can “recalibrate” our hearts and minds?