
Chapter 5.2

Virtue Apologetics in the OT

Primary Points

- One reason God uniquely gave the Israelites His laws was so that their superior virtue might authenticate their superior standing with God to all other nations and religions.
- Wisdom as well is recognized as a virtue, and God intended His people to be superior in it such that the world would notice.
- Unfortunately, because the OT saints were generally not spiritually regenerated, they could not fulfill the God's expectation of supernatural *virtue apologetics*.
- The example of Ananias and Sapphira demonstrates that holiness, not just love, can attract seeking unbelievers to Christ.

In a world in which agnostic skeptics and postmodern philosophers have convinced Christians that they must introduce any claim to truth with a lengthy apologetic discourse, it is both refreshing and corrective to be reminded that God's own written presentation of truth begins very *unapologetically* and remains so. It is unapologetic about both the source and content of truth and about the basic presuppositions concerning the communication and recognition of truth.¹

For example, the first sentence of the most effective and influential communication of ultimate truth ever written says, "**In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth**" (Gen 1:1). Whether you agree with the first sentence of Christian Scripture or not, all have to agree that the Bible begins boldly. As the Christian theologian Bernard Ramm remarked, "The Scriptures are nowhere concerned with the theistic proof or proofs for the existence of God, such as are found throughout the history of philosophy and theology."²

The Scriptures leave little doubt that God has always expected supernatural virtue to be the ultimate apologetic for the spiritual superiority of His people. As the renowned Bible scholar John Stott puts it:

For insofar as the church is conformed to the world, and the two communities appear to the onlooker to be merely two

versions of the same thing, the church is contradicting its true identity. No comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words, 'But you are no different from anybody else.'

For the essential theme of the whole Bible from beginning to end is that God's historical purpose is to call out a people for himself; that this people is a 'holy' people, set apart from the world to belong to him and to obey him; and that its vocation is to be true to its identity, that is, to be 'holy' or 'different' in all its outlook and behavior.³

This would seem to be one reason that He uniquely gave the Israelites His laws, so that their superior virtue might authenticate their superior standing with God. Moses said:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." . . . [W]hat other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:5-8)

God did not give the Jews His laws so that they might have a *knowledge* that would provide them with intellectual arguments for the superiority of their faith. Rather, God gave them *moral* laws, so that if they would "**observe them carefully**" the pagan nations would recognize their moral and spiritual superiority (cf. Lev 18:1-4; 2 Sam 12:13-14; Neh 5:8-9; Isa 42:6; Ezek 11:12; 36:20-23; Rom 2:23-24). This is why David exalted in the fact that, "**He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake**" (Ps 23:3). David's son Solomon understood and expressed the power of virtue when he wrote, "**Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city**" (Prov 16:32).

Wisdom as well is recognized as a virtue, and God intended His people to be superior in it such that the world would notice. Accordingly, Proverbs is almost completely moral in nature, because wisdom in Scripture is pervasively moral in nature.⁴ This apologetic effect of wisdom was demonstrated in the lives of Solomon, Daniel, and Christ (cf. 1 Kgs 4:34; 10:3-9; Dan 1:20; 4:9; 5:11-16; Matt 7:28-29; Luke 2:46-47).

Nonetheless, because the Jewish nation as a whole was never regenerated by the Spirit, giving them "**a new heart and . . . a new spirit**" (Ezek 36:26) to dethrone the sinful nature humans are born with, they were not able to be morally superior to the pagan nations. However, with the coming of "**the washing of rebirth and renewal**

by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5) after Pentecost, God’s people can now effectively engage in *virtue apologetics* as God intended.⁵

Pastoral Practices

- Does your congregation have a reputation for love and holiness? Many congregations are strong in one and weak in the other. In America, the greater danger is lacking a perception of holiness rather than love. For example, a church may be known for serving the needy, but not for excommunicating the hypocrites. Perhaps because we think love is more attractive than holiness and we want to be liked.

But we should ponder the practical application of the early Church’s incident involving Ananias and Sapphira. God killed them for their sin (cf. Acts 5:1-10). Afterwards we read things that would not make sense to the “church growth” experts of today:

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. . . . No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (vs. 13-15).

It was the mere religious observers, who may want to join a church like a club to make them feel better, who would not dare join the early Church. It was because they knew the Church had a standard of holiness. As a result, it would seem God used their example to convict “**more and more**” people of their need for a Savior, and such were “**added to their number.**”

We cannot be content with being just a “nice” church that is liked in the community, and simply attracts “nice” people. We must also be a holy church that convicts the community, and attracts converts.

Publications & Particulars

¹ *Intellectual apologist* Norman Geisler suggests that the order in which Creation is reflected in Genesis 1 was “apologetic” because it diminished the place of the sun, which other ancient religions worshipped as God. (*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (BECA)* [Baker, 1999], 37) However, this revelation is not intended to *defend* and prove the truth of Genesis 1, but to *proclaim* it unapologetically as truth.

² “Biblical Apologetics” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia [ISBE]*, Geoffrey Bromiley ed. 4 vols. [Eerdmans, 1988], I:190.

³ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, revised edition of *Christian Counter Culture* (John Stott, 1978), 17.

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- ⁴ For further discussion of the biblical fact that wisdom in Scripture is predominantly moral in nature, rather than amoral (e.g. what morally acceptable house, job, or spouse to choose), see chapters 14.17-14.18.
- ⁵ Sadly, the fact that Christians were indwelt by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for the purpose of *virtue apologetics* is obscured by the popular but inaccurate teaching that Pentecost was to bring continuing, physical, miracle working abilities to God's people. As pointed out in chapter 5.1, God does not intend today to authenticate the Gospel with "charismatic" miracles, but rather, with "character" miracles. For further discussion on the place of miracle working today see Book 11.