
Chapter 5.14

The Superiority of *Virtue Apologetics*

And the Inferiority of Intellectual Apologetics

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Publications & Particulars

Primary Points

- While *intellectual apologetics* focuses on merely proving the existence of God or the uniqueness of the Bible, *virtue apologetics* more directly and clearly defends the exclusivity of specifically the Christian Gospel.
- The ultimate goal of *intellectual apologists* to prove that Christianity “makes the best sense of the world” is rather useless to distinguish it from other theistic and/or “moralistic” religions such as Islam.
- The personally experienced evidence of *virtue apologetics* is much more convincing than the ancient historical evidence of *intellectual apologetics*.
- *Virtue apologetics* is uniquely universal because love is a language that speaks loudly and persuasively in every culture.
- It is actually quite easy to refute the arguments of *intellectual apologetics*.
- Many aspects of *intellectual apologetics* are too complex to be useful.
- We must promote the superiority of *virtue apologetics* if we do not want to abdicate this personal responsibility to a small class of intellectuals.
- Some Christians hesitate to evangelize because they feel unable to answer all the questions that *intellectual apologists* claim they will be asked.
- Far, far more people have been won to Christianity by *virtue apologetics* than all other apologetic approaches combined, if it played any part at all.
- The best weapon against postmodern skepticism is not more or better intellectual arguments, but love.
- If we cannot prove the exclusivity of Christianity by our virtue than we have no business trying to prove it any other way.
- *Intellectual apologetics* makes no difficult moral demands on Christians, and we fear this is precisely why some people are so eager to embrace it.
- One possible reason that many Christians are morally coasting with the spiritual power they have instead of soaring is because *virtue apologetics* has been grossly neglected for so long.

Obviously, the greatest advantage of *virtue apologetics* over *intellectual apologetics* in the context of evangelism is that there are an abundance of commands and references to the former, and the latter is outright denounced.¹ Accordingly, it should not surprise us that there are a number of practical advantages to *virtue apologetics* as well.

A) *Virtue Apologetics* Focuses on the Gospel

A first reason that *virtue apologetics* is superior to the *intellectual* kind is that the former most directly and clearly defends the exclusivity of specifically the Christian Gospel. The strength of other approaches seems to be more in simply proving the existence of God (such as the *cosmological argument*), or the uniqueness of the Bible (such as fulfilled prophecy). These arguments have their place and value, but, we would suggest, they are also unnecessary for someone to be saved through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, we would again suggest that such arguments have more value in building the faith of believers than sparking the interest of unbelievers, particularly when compared to *virtue apologetics*.²

B) *Virtue Apologetics* is More Effective in Distinguishing Between Religions

This relates to a second reason that *virtue apologetics* is superior to the *intellectual* kind: the latter has difficulty distinguishing the Christian religion from others. For example, Norm Geisler writes:

The moral manifestation of a belief does not settle the truth question. . . . There is evidence for whether something is true other than the lifestyle of its adherents. Truth is what corresponds to reality and, hence, a religion is true if its central tenets correspond to the real world, not merely whether its followers live a good life or even a better one than adherents of another religion.³

Dr. Geisler is right, of course, that virtue is not the only evidence for the truth of a religion and that such a religion is only true if it corresponds to the real world. However, is his *intellectual apologetics* the best way to convince an atheist, pluralist or Muslim that Christianity uniquely does so? We would suggest that the popular approach to apologetics is no different than the one favored by Islam of which R. L. Rambo notes:

[T]he Muslim believes that the propositional tenets of his faith are self-evident if they are properly presented and understood, and the focus of his proselytization is the proclamation of these tenets rather than the experiences of human beings. ⁴

For such faiths as Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses which believe in a Creator God, how would *intellectual apologists* even prove the relatively insignificant philosophical point that it "makes the best sense of the world"? If the truth of a religion is ultimately demonstrated when, "its central tenets correspond to the real world," as Dr. Geisler suggests, we would suggest that it would be difficult to prove the superiority of the Christian Gospel without considering its moral impact. However, we believe that the moral superiority of regenerated Christians could be demonstrated in comparison with unregenerated members of any religion or Christian cult.

Therefore, we would respectfully disagree with Dr. Geisler and suggest that, "the moral manifestation of a belief" *does* and should "settle the truth question." Dr. Yandall Woodfin, Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary agrees when he writes: "The world can learn that Christianity has received the ultimate and final revelation only when Christians present the exclusiveness of this claim through the demonstration of their love." ⁵

C) *Virtue Apologetics* Provides Personal Rather Than Historical Evidence

A third weakness of *intellectual apologetics* is that particularly the *evidential* approach is completely dependent upon historical research and evidence which is normally less convincing than contemporary evidence that people can experience for themselves. We do not deny that the authenticating miracles of Christ and the Apostles have just as much historical veracity as any other historical events that are accepted without doubt. However, knowing human nature, we believe God desires an apologetic that provides convincing miracles *today*, which is the supernatural virtue of His people. Another way of saying it is that *personal experiences* (of another's supernatural virtue) are much more convincing than *intellectual arguments* (concerning the historicity of Christ's resurrection).

The eighteenth century German theologian G. E. Lessing (1721-1789) was famous for his "Lessing's Ditch" which can be defined with his statement that, "Accidental truths of history can never become the necessary truths of reason." ⁶ While we would contend that Lessing and his followers such as Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) went too far

in diminishing the truth value of human history,⁷ there would seem to be some practical truth in his statement that:

Miracles, which I see with my own eyes, and which I have the opportunity to verify for myself, are one thing. Miracles, of which I know only from history that others say they have seen them and verified them, are another.⁸

What God wants our unconverted neighbors, workmates, classmates, friends and family members to see is a living miracle, and that is precisely what He intends to provide through the supernatural virtue empowered by the Holy Spirit uniquely living in us.⁹

Intellectual apologetics focuses on convincing people of miracles that occurred long ago. *Virtue apologetics* promotes moral miracles that can be observed now. The superiority of this can be demonstrated in many ways. For example, if someone can speak very intelligently about all kinds of philosophical, scientific and historical arguments for the Christian faith, but those listening know the person doesn't act very Christian, their intellectual arguments will mean virtually nothing. On the other hand, if people know a Christian who really lives like a Christian, but does not have well-informed answers to philosophical, scientific, or historical questions about Christianity, a person will remain significantly impressed with the Christian themselves.

Nonetheless, this brings up perhaps the most persuasive thing about someone well versed in *intellectual apologetics*: their virtue! Intelligence and reason are considered virtues by most people and when someone is knowledgeable about their faith it will be considered attractive. However, it will not necessarily be the perceived value of the intellectual arguments themselves that will be convincing, but rather, the knowledge and obvious effort put into gaining that knowledge. In other words, someone might be unimpressed with the arguments for Christianity, but remain impressed with how the Christian excels in the virtues of being reasonable and knowledgeable.

D) *Virtue Apologetics* has Universal Appeal

Fourth, we would suggest that *virtue apologetics* is uniquely universal. Accordingly, we would respectfully disagree with someone like Dr. Stackhouse when he says:

There is, in short, no "one size fits all" universal apologetic. . . . The epistemological reality of widely varying cognitive styles, worldviews, and so on can entail simply a barrier of unintelligibility that is not going to be breached . . .¹⁰

While the *intellectual apologetics* that Dr. Stackhouse is speaking of may be hindered by such barriers, *virtue apologetics* will not be, as Christ expected love to be a language that would speak to “**all men**” (cf. John 13:34-35).

Along these lines, Dr. Schaeffer commented:

Jesus did give the mark that will arrest the attention of the world, even the attention of the modern man who says he is just a machine. Because every man is made in the image of God and has, therefore, aspirations for love, there is something that can be in every geographical climate-in every point of time-which cannot fail to arrest his attention. What is it? The love that true Christians show for each other [cf. John 13:34-5].¹¹

This is because love is a language that speaks loudly and persuasively in every culture.

E) *Virtue Apologetics* is the Most Difficult to Argue Against

Fifth, while there are admittedly difficulties and potential arguments against *virtue apologetics*, the same would seem even more true for other apologetic approaches. It is actually quite easy to amass arguments against scientific or historical evidence and philosophical theories. In fact, even Christian theologians have provided convincing critiques of the *ontological argument* of Anselm, Descartes, and Plantinga, the *cosmological argument* of ones like William Lane Craig, and the *teleological argument* of ones like William Paley, F. R. Tennant, and Richard Swinburne.¹² As we have noted elsewhere, the reason that so many Christian apologists argue for the superiority of one *intellectual apologetic* approach over another is that they all have weaknesses.

However, love has a way of bringing a hushed silence upon even the most learned critic, and love is among the things most difficult to argue against, particularly when you are the recipient of it, and a Christian is the source. In fact, *intellectual apologetics* is rather synonymous with arguing because it consists of arguments. And that approach can immediately cause people to put up their defenses. Love, however, can lower those defenses.

Before the invasion of France in World War II, the French built a very heavy line of defenses on their eastern border called the Maginot Line. The preparations included trenches, walls, fences, and a multitude of heavy gun positions, not to mention their heaviest concentration of soldiers. Hitler could have thrown divisions of tanks, artillery, and men against those defenses and may never have invaded

France. So what did he do? Hitler just went around the Maginot Line and took over France rather effortlessly.

This is the mistake *intellectual apologetics* makes. Trying to *attack* the strongest defenses of the enemy, when in fact, we can go right around them and bypass them with *virtue apologetics*. We can teach atheists the truth, after they get saved.¹³

F) *Intellectual Apologetics* is Usually Too Complex

Sixth, *intellectual apologetics* is too complex to be of use to most believers and unbelievers alike. The intricacies of many types of such apologetics, which include the ontological, cosmological, and teleological approaches, require at least some philosophical training to even understand them, let alone appreciate them.

Accordingly, one notes that the *intellectual apologetics* that God uses in His Creation is not prohibitively complex at all. The miraculous intricacy of the Universe is readily apparent to humans such that even the most simple of them is "**without excuse**" (Rom 1:20).¹⁴

Let us remember, that most of the elect that we are searching for could be described the same way as Paul did the Corinthian converts: "**Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards**" (1 Cor 1:26). Fortunately, even the most simple unbeliever can recognize and appreciate love.

G) *Intellectual Apologetics* Hinders Evangelism

Seventh, an emphasis on *intellectual apologetics* makes Christian apologetics something primarily carried out by the professional philosophers instead of any Spirit-filled Christian. To really become proficient at *intellectual apologetics* requires years of careful study that most Christians are not naturally or spiritually gifted for. Along these lines, William Abraham, Professor of Theology and Philosophy at SMU writes concerning such an approach:

It involves the invention of a highly formal conception of God, which requires considerable intellectual skill if it is to be understood. Moreover, the debate about God turns on mastery of this concept as the fundamental element in religion. The debate itself requires even more elaborate intellectual skill if it is to be followed. Ordinary believers sit on the sidelines . . .

As a result, ordinary believers become second-class citizens in the kingdom of faith. They become dependent on philosophical theologians to explain to them the "true" meaning of religious

concepts and doctrines. . . . The meaning of religion, therefore, becomes more and more remote from ordinary believers.

So too does the justification of their cherished convictions. Justification means mastering elaborate philosophical arguments developed by experts. Unfortunately the experts disagree. Even if the experts sound convincing, believers seem to be dependent on works of great genius before they have any right to believe. The ordinary believer seems thoroughly naive when compared with such brilliant defenders of the faith.¹⁵

In particular, and unfortunately, sharing the Gospel has almost become synonymous with *intellectual apologetics*. Far too many Christians hesitate to share the Gospel because they feel inadequate to answer all the questions that *intellectual apologists* claim they will be asked. Listen to how intimidating the son of Sean McDowell sounds when he describes his efforts to reach an unbelieving friend named John:

He has not become a Christian yet, but he is inching along. We continue to have good discussions about God and the meaning of life. . . . Had my youth pastor, parents, and teachers not trained me in apologetics, I couldn't have helped him at all. You and I can't be ambassadors without having answers to tough questions.¹⁶

Really? Without his extraordinary opportunities and grasp of intellectual arguments for the Christian faith Sean, "couldn't have helped him at all"? Most Christians hope that isn't true, and fortunately it isn't, because the *virtue apologetics* that all Spirit-indwelled Christians can practice is far more powerful and important to "be ambassadors" than "having answers to tough questions."

Accordingly, the King commanded every Christian to be an apologist by their love and holiness (cf. Matt 5:14-16; John 13:34-35). Therefore, we must promote the superiority of *virtue apologetics* if we do not want to abdicate this personal responsibility to wield our sword of the Spirit, instead of delegating apologetics to a small class of intellectuals who, in comparison, are only wielding a pocket knife.

H) *Virtue Apologetics* is Confirmed by Our Experience

Eighth, most people know in their own hearts and experience that the value and affect of *virtue apologetics* far surpasses any other. Far, far more people have been won to Christianity by *virtue apologetics*

than all other apologetic approaches combined, if apologetics has played any part at all.

I) *Virtue Apologetics* is Most Effective in a Postmodern Culture

Postmodernism is essentially the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. *Intellectual apologists* understandably spin their wheels trying to convince a postmodern skeptic that there is such a thing as objective truth, and they focus on what they purport to be objective arguments.

How much better to supernaturally love the postmodern skeptic and give him the *subjective* personally convincing evidence they are looking for! Instead of battering against the massive front gate of the postmodern fortress with intellectual arguments, why not go through the open back door, which is the fact that all postmoderns want to be loved. In fact, whatever popularity or influence postmodernism has in our culture, makes the use of *virtue apologetics* over the intellectual kind all the more effective and critical. In a postmodern age, we need to crank up our virtue, not our "objective" arguments. Along these lines, Christian pollster David Kinnaman writes:

Most people, by personality, are not logical thinkers and are not likely to change their beliefs because of elegant argumentation or apologetics. . . most people do not become Christians because of the overwhelming evidence. And since Mosaics and Busters are more likely to possess a nonlinear, fluid way of processing life, they are increasingly comfortable with subtlety, nuance, ambiguity, and contradiction. So even if you are able to weave a compelling logical argument, young people will nod, smile, and ignore you.¹⁷

In support of *virtue apologetics*, however, Mr. Kinnaman writes elsewhere:

Apologetics is changing because young people are resistant to mere intellectual arguments, yet they seem to be as open as any generation to meaningful, transparent, long-term, and loving relationships. Our research confirms this over and over.¹⁸

Actually, we believe research a hundred or even thousand years ago would have revealed the same, because people are people and ones like Mr. Kinnaman seem to exaggerate cultural shifts. Nonetheless, he provides support for our view of apologetics.

Accordingly, we have written elsewhere:

Not only do we refuse to accommodate *postmodern* philosophy in a biblical theology, neither do we think it has much place in evangelism as well. Accommodating our message to the latest epistemological fad among the heathen is a dangerous thing, especially when that fad is so counter-Christian. It will always be love that gains us an opportunity to communicate the Gospel in words, and such words will always be all that the Spirit needs to make the Gospel “**the power of salvation for everyone who believes**” (Rom 1:16), whether their perspective on truth is premodern, modern, postmodern, or post-postmodern.¹⁹

J) ***Virtue Apologetics* is the Most Helpful for Discipleship**

Finally, an emphasis on *intellectual apologetics* with a corresponding absence of *virtue apologetics* reinforces the plague in American Christianity that believes spiritual maturity is growing in knowledge, instead of character. “**Knowledge puffs up but love builds up**” (1 Cor 8:1). This is why it is better for someone to come to Christ through *virtue apologetics* instead of the intellectual kind. Again, while we are not particular about how people come to a saving knowledge of Christ, we would suggest that the person who was attracted to the Savior through the supernatural love of Christians, better understands from the very beginning of their discipleship that Authentic Christianity is about virtue, not mere knowledge.

Intellectual apologetics is a sad substitute for virtue. It is embarrassing to see so many Christian theologians denying virtue as an apologetic, and suggesting that the intellectual kind can suffice. If they feel they need to do so because of a perceived lack of virtue among professing Christians, it is understandable. But to completely ignore the biblical prescription for this very thing is inexcusable. And let us be honest and admit that if we cannot prove the exclusivity of Christianity by our virtue than we have no business trying to prove it any other way. If Christians are immoral they have simply lost any right or opportunity to be a testimony for their faith. Nothing can make up for a lack of virtue because it is the ultimate apologetic for a religion that claims to be the only one accepted by the Creator.

Virtue apologetics motivates Christians to live up to their God-given moral potential in a way that other apologetic approaches will not. *Intellectual apologetics* makes no moral demands on the Christian, and we fear that this is precisely why some people are so eager to embrace and promote it. It is precisely because of what *virtue apologetics* can do for the life of *believers*, that God intended it to be the ultimate and universal proof of Christianity.

It is when we understand that God wants us living our lives on a stage for the unbelieving world to see, that we will take our mandate to be this planet's moral salt and light more seriously. As in most areas of life, a response to a serious and significant challenge or need brings out a person's fullest capabilities. One possible reason that many Christians are morally coasting with the spiritual power they have instead of soaring is because *virtue apologetics* has been grossly neglected for so long. *Virtue apologetics* is the biblical challenge needed to push the world's only spiritual butterflies to consistently live above the caterpillars. May we fly like God has uniquely recreated us to!

Pastoral Practices

- Based on the importance that Scripture places on *virtue apologetics*, it would seem important to teach this to our churches at some point in time, for all the reasons given here.

Publications & Particulars

¹ The biblical nature of *virtue apologetics* has been demonstrated in chapters 5.2-4 5.9, 5.13. The unbiblical nature of *intellectual apologetics* was demonstrated in section 5.10.A and chapters 5.11-13.

² For further discussion of the claim that the primary value of apologetics is for believers see section 6.12.C.1.

³ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (BECA)* (Baker, 1999), 599.

⁴ Rambo, L. R. *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale University Press, 1993), 1.

⁵ Yandall Woodfin, *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy* (Abingdon, 1980), 30, 172.

⁶ Geisler, 420.

⁷ For further discussion of historical skepticism see chapter 2.7

⁸ G. E. Lessing, *Theological Writings* (Stanford University Press, 1957), 57.

⁹ For further discussion regarding the superiority of *virtue apologetics* over the evidential approach concerning Christ's resurrection see section 2.7.A.2.

¹⁰ John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 154.

¹¹ Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian* (Intervarsity, 1970), 16.

- ¹² For a succinct and convincing critique of several *intellectual apologetic* approaches see William Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Prentice-Hall, 1985), 24-35. In addition, Kelly James Clark makes a good case for the inadequacy of apologetics in general to convince the unbeliever of Christianity apart from regeneration in his entry to *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven Cowan, ed. (Zondervan, 2000), 138-143.
- ¹³ For a remarkable example of the effect of *virtue apologetics* on an atheist see the rather famous video of the magician Penn Jillette at http://www.crackle.com/c/ComicCon/A_Gift_of_a_Bible/2415037. Penn is a rather renowned and aggressive atheist. It is instructive to imagine what would have happened if the Christian who spoke with Penn would have come to him with intellectual arguments about Christianity like so many no doubt have. Instead, this brother bypassed all of Penn's intellectual defenses with virtue that was supernatural enough that not even this hardened atheist could deny or ignore it.
- ¹⁴ Accordingly, Thomas Schreiner writes regarding Romans 1:18-23:
 Neither is Paul suggesting that knowledge of God's existence and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning, so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God's existence (Hooker 1959-60: 299). Instead, this knowledge of God is a reality for all people, not simply for those who possess unusually logical minds. They come to a knowledge of God through the created world because "God made it manifest to them" (v. 19).
 Of course, this knowledge is mediated through observation of the created world. His attributes of power and divinity "have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made" (v. 20). To understand that Paul does not refer to a long process of reasoning by which people come to a knowledge of God's existence and power is critical (so also Wilckens 1978: 106). God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world. (*Romans*, [1998], 86).
- ¹⁵ Abraham, *Philosophy*, 100-101.
- ¹⁶ Sean McDowell, 26.
- ¹⁷ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Baker, 2007), 72.
- ¹⁸ David Kinnaman, "Forward" in *Apologetics for a New Generation* (2009), 10.
- ¹⁹ Excerpt from chapter 2.12.