
Chapter 5.11

Paul's Rejection of *Intellectual Apologetics*

"My message was not with wise and persuasive words"

Table of Topics

A) Paul's Rejection of *Intellectual Apologetics* in Evangelism

A.1) 1 Cor 1:17-2:5

A.2) 2 Cor 4:1-5

A.3) Instructions to Timothy & Titus: *Don't argue with obstinate unbelievers*

B) Historical Support for Paul's Rejection of *Intellectual Apologetics* for Evangelism: Lloyd-Jones: "*apologetics has been the curse of evangelical Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years*"

C) Why *Intellectual Apologetics* is Ineffective

D) Why *Virtue Apologetics* but not *Intellectual Apologetics*?

Extras & Endnotes

Primary Points

- Paul taught that using philosophical reasons to attract people to the Gospel actually neutralized its power to save. *Intellectual apologetics* is unbiblical.
- The Apostle Paul made it clear that it is the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than the power of our arguments, that is needed if people are to take even the first step toward Christ.
- The Apostle commanded Timothy and Titus not to argue with unbelievers about the doctrines of the Christian faith.
- We share the concern of D. M. Lloyd-Jones who said, "I am not sure that apologetics has not been the curse of evangelical Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years.
- *Intellectual apologetics* is ineffective because **"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned"** (1 Cor 2:14).
- For those who had an especially powerful experience with *intellectual apologetics* in their salvation, we would suggest the possibility that it was because the Spirit had already come into their life at that point.
- The reason the Apostle encouraged and pursued *virtue apologetics* but denounced *intellectual apologetics* is because the latter is essential to effectively communicating the simple Gospel. No one will trust a message given by someone they do not deem trustworthy. *Intellectual apologetics*, however, adds unnecessary elements to the simple saving Gospel.

A) Paul's Rejection of *Intellectual Apologetics* in Evangelism

A.1) 1 Cor 1:17-2:5

It is in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church that we get the best description of his own approach to evangelism. And it is both surprising and sobering to recognize how strongly the Apostle actually denounced the popular approach to evangelism that *intellectual apologists* promote. We have defined *intellectual apologetics* as the promotion of extra-biblical scientific, philosophical, and historical arguments for the existence of God, the authority of Scripture, and the superiority of the Christian faith in general.¹ While we have recognized the value of such extra-biblical study and arguments for the building of a Christian's faith,² we have questioned its use in the context of evangelizing unregenerated unbelievers.³ *Intellectual apologetics* is extra-biblical in the fact that it primarily seeks scientific, philosophical, or historical evidence outside of Scripture to make its defense of what Scripture says.

More specifically, *intellectual apologists* believe such arguments are an important, if not necessary, part of unbelievers getting saved. For example, the rightly respected Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul has written:

[*Intellectual*] Apologetics is indispensable for the establishing of [the intellectual assent to Christian truth that occurs before someone gets saved]. Though apologetics may not be evangelism, it is a vital part of pre-evangelism.⁴

On the contrary, the Apostle taught that using philosophical reasons to persuade people to accept the Gospel actually neutralizes its power to save. In a word, *intellectual apologetics* is an unbiblical approach to evangelism. The Apostle said so when he wrote:

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel—not with words of human wisdom [*sophia logon*: lit. "wisdom of speech"], lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called [to salvation], both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God [for salvation]. . . .

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called [to salvation]. Not many of you were wise ["intellectuals" 5] by human standards . . . 27 God chose [for salvation 6] the foolish things of the world [i.e. people, Gospel] to shame the wise; God chose [for salvation] the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose [for salvation] the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not [the "nobodies" 7]—to nullify the things that are, 8 29 so that no one may boast before Him [about their salvation]. 30 It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus [i.e. saved]. . . 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

1 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom [*uperoxēn logon ē sophias*: lit. "preeminent words, ideas, or wisdom," 9] as I proclaimed to you the testimony 10 about God. 2 For I resolved to know [nor preach] nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Cor 1:17-2:5)

This passage of Scripture would seem to denounce *intellectual apologetics* in the context of evangelism or even "pre-evangelism." As we have demonstrated in the evangelistic ministry of Christ, Paul's approach to evangelism was very *unapologetic*.¹¹

First, it is important to understand the religious context in which the Apostle writes. This is succinctly described when he says "**Greeks look for wisdom**" (1:22). Accordingly, NT scholar Leon Morris (1914-2006) writes:

Some at least of the Corinthians were setting too high a value on human wisdom and human eloquence in line with the typical Greek admiration for rhetoric and philosophical studies. . . . The Greeks were absorbed in speculative philosophy. No names were

more honored among them than the names of their outstanding thinkers.¹²

It would seem that like the Corinthians, *intellectual apologists* as well are "setting too high a value" on the "rhetoric" that the Greeks so much admired. "Rhetoric" is simply persuasive speech, whether because of its oratory style, argumentative format, or persuasive content. While such logical and reasonable argumentation certainly has its place in effectively teaching Christians, as we will see, the Apostle believed this approach was dangerous in the context of evangelizing unregenerated humans with *devil-darkened reason*.¹³

In light of the Corinthian context of valuing philosophical argumentation in the presentation of ideas such as the Gospel, the words *logos* [trans. "**words**" v.17; 2:4; "**word**" v. 1:18; "**speech**" v. 2:2, 4; and *sophia* [trans. "**wisdom**" vs. 1:17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 30; 2:2, 4 "**wise**" vs. 1: 26, 27] take on a negative sense here. The Apostle is intentionally contrasting his evangelistic ministry to that of Greek orators who would speak in Corinth and other Greek cities to persuade people of their philosophies.¹⁴

The Greek philosophers spoke with "**words of human wisdom**" (1:17), making arguments that people would think were "**wise**" and "**intelligent**" (1:19). They strived for "**superior wisdom**" (2:1) and "**wise and persuasive words**" (2:4) and "**men's wisdom**" (2:5) in order to convince people by the sheer power of their logic, arguments, intelligence, and debating skills.¹⁵ Accordingly, NT scholar C. K. Barrett writes that the method of "**superior wisdom**" that Paul denounces refers to "skill of argumentation."¹⁶ Likewise, Dr. Morris interprets this as "the way [a] mind marshaled . . . facts."¹⁷ It is clear that the Apostle's descriptions of the Greek philosophers and what he rejected is heavily reflected in modern *intellectual apologetics* directed to unbelievers. Even the great *intellectual apologist* Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) summarized the Apostle's thoughts here as follows:

Hence, just as he had said earlier that it was not his intention to make his preaching rest on philosophical reasoning [1:17], so now he says that it was not his intention to make it rest on persuasions of rhetoric [2:4].¹⁸

The purpose of the Greek orators was to make their message as attractive to their listeners as possible; an approach that certainly makes sense from a human-centered point of view, but which the Apostle warned would be ineffective and even misleading in the preaching of the Gospel.

Accordingly, the Apostle condemned the approach of both ancient Greek rhetoricians and modern *intellectual apologists*. The Apostle's approach to evangelizing unbelievers was, "**to preach the Gospel**" (1:17), "**the message of the cross,**" (1:18), and "**Christ crucified**"

(1:23). In fact, in Paul's evangelistic ministry He intentionally "**resolved to know**" and therefore preach "**nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**" (2:2). As Dr. Morris puts it, Paul's method of evangelism was:

a plain, unvarnished setting forth of the simple gospel. There had been nothing attractive about it. But precisely because it was so simple and unpretentious its results convincingly demonstrated the power of God. . . . Paul is denying that he used the methods of human wisdom when he preached.¹⁹

While *intellectual apologists* claim that "**the wisdom of God**" (1:24) and the "**testimony about God**" (2:1) in an effective evangelistic ministry should include all kinds of philosophical, historical, and scientific arguments, for the Apostle, these same things were the simple Gospel. How many *intellectual apologists* could describe their evangelistic ministry (or would even want to describe their ministry) as the Apostle Paul did when he wrote?:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words (2:1-4)

The NLT translates Paul in 2:1-2 this way: "**I didn't use . . . brilliant ideas to tell you God's message. For I decided to concentrate only on Jesus Christ and His death on the cross**" (NLT 2:1-2). On the contrary, modern apologetic ministries to unbelievers are all about confidently proving a "**superior wisdom**" over others through "**brilliant ideas**" for the purpose of propping up the Gospel to supposedly make it more acceptable to the unregenerated.

Paul intentionally restrained himself to be a preacher who simply explained the Gospel, not an *intellectual apologist* who argued to defend the Gospel. The proof of the Gospel was not in how reasonable some persuasive, extra-biblical arguments could make it appear to unregenerated humans. This was even when his audience in Corinth and elsewhere wanted intellectual debate and reasoning.

Here, the Apostle remarkably seemed to violate a cardinal rule of his evangelistic ministry. He wrote the Corinthians elsewhere that he was willing to, "**become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some**" (2 Cor 9:22). Accordingly, he was willing to act like "**a Jew,**" as "**one under the law,**" as "**those not having the law,**" and for "**the weak**" he "**became weak, to win**

the weak" (vs. 20-22). *But he was not willing to become wise to win the wise, because that would not help them believe the Gospel.*

The proof, and therefore the power of the Gospel would come with a "**demonstration of the Spirit's power**" (1 Cor 2:5) in convicting people of the need for a Savior (cf. John 16:8), and regenerating their broken minds resulting in the gift of *saving faith* in the Savior.²⁰ The Apostle described this very same "**demonstration of the Spirit's power**" in converting unbelievers when he wrote the Thessalonians: "**For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our Gospel came to you not simply with words [and certainly not with a lot of intellectual argumentation], but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction**" (1 Thess 1:4-5).

What then was the "**demonstration of the Spirit's power**"? The supernatural conviction and rebirth that occurs through the working of the Holy Spirit *only* in the context of a clear presentation of the simple Gospel *only* in the presence of God's elect.²¹ Accordingly, NT scholar Anthony Thiselton comments:

The [Greek] rhetorical background makes it virtually certain that Paul gives rhetorical or *logical demonstration* . . . a distinctive turn [more accurately a complete rejection] by ascribing **proof** ultimately to the agency of the **Holy Spirit** as effective **power**.²²

While *intellectual apologists* strive to make Christianity attractive to especially the more intellectual unbeliever, "**God was pleased through the foolishness [not a perceived reasonableness] of what was preached to save those who believe**" (1:21). In fact, contrary to *intellectual apologetics*, God wants to "**frustrate . . . the intelligence of the intelligent**" and is not interested in the least about being attractive to the unregenerated "**wise man,**" "**scholar,**" or "**philosopher of this age**" (1:19-20).

And it is precisely the idea, that striving to make the Gospel intellectually attractive to unbelievers is a good idea, that is part of "**the wisdom of the world**" that "**God [has] made foolish**" (1:20). Of course, *intellectual apologetics* fits in very well with how things work in the world. If you think you need to persuade someone of something, the way to do it is through "**wise and persuasive words**" (2:4). Unfortunately, *intellectual apologists* have adopted a worldly paradigm and method for something that requires and is intended to display "**the power of God**" (2:5).

Not only did the Apostle Paul's evangelistic strategy not have the *content* that *intellectual apologists* suppose, but it did not have the *effect* that they are looking for either. The Apostle's Greek audience wanted intellectual, philosophical, winsome, worldly wise, and persuasive justification for his message. They would have considered such things as an attractive virtue. But because the Apostle simply

preached the claims of the Gospel, his approach came across as "**foolishness**" (1 Cor 1:18, 21, 23), the exact opposite of what *intellectual apologists* strive so hard to accomplish.

Accordingly, God *is not pleased* with a worldly evangelistic approach that attempts to make the Gospel seem attractive and "wise" to unregenerated humans. In fact, if unregenerated humans find our preaching attractive instead of foolish, then we are probably not preaching "**the Gospel**" (1:17), "**the message of the cross,**" (1:18), and "**Christ crucified**" (1:23), but rather, man-made philosophical, historical, and scientific arguments intended to make Christianity attractive and acceptable to unregenerated reason on merely a human level. Such arguments may be true, and supportive of our faith, but the Apostle believed they lacked any power to truly help people repent of their sin and submit to a Savior.

Not only did the Apostle think *intellectual apologetic* arguments were worthless in an evangelistic ministry, but he believed they were detrimental and dangerous. Such a human-centered approach, involving human arguments, human persuasion, and striving merely for a human decision, all detract and obscure the fact that salvation from beginning to end and at every point in between, is God's work, not a human work. If we make the salvation of souls ultimately or even partly a human work or decision we militate against it being purely a work of God, and in fact, *people will not get saved from our preaching.*

All of which exposes a fundamental error in the theology of *intellectual apologetics*. Their methods imply that the unbeliever's initial problem is ignorance that can be cured with extra-biblical human arguments. On the contrary, the initial obstacle for anyone to be saved is that they are spiritually dead, deaf, and blind ²³ and that can only be cured by spiritual regeneration through "**the Spirit's power**" (2:4).

Notice then why the Apostle excluded the use of *intellectual apologetics* from his evangelistic ministry. It was to facilitate, rather than hinder, the working of "**God's power**" or the "**Spirit's power**" in giving *saving faith* to people. Few people take Paul's warning seriously enough that if "**words of human wisdom**" are used in our evangelistic message, the message of "**the cross of Christ [will] be emptied of its power**" (1:17). Paul warns again that if our evangelistic ministry is "**with wise and persuasive words**" to argue and defend the Gospel at a human level, that we are in danger of forfeiting "**a demonstration of the Spirit's power**" (2:4) necessary for people to get saved, all because we are trusting too much in our power to save. It would seem that *intellectual apologists* need to be reminded that not only are people not saved by *their* works, but they are not saved by ours either.

When God sees men arrogantly thinking they need to improve on His humble Gospel with their intelligent and attractive arguments, He is likely to withdraw His Spirit for fear that He alone will not receive all the glory for being the only ultimate reason anyone gets saved. And because God withdraws His Spirit, and the people's faith is based on persuasive intellectual arguments, their faith is a *false faith* that "**rest[s] on men's wisdom**" instead of "**God's power**" (2:5) and they do not get saved.²⁴ If *intellectual apologetics* is an integral part of our evangelism, we will encourage false conversions to Christ that have nothing to do with "**God's power.**" Accordingly, Dr. Barrett interprets the Apostle here as saying:

[Gospel] preaching that depended for its effectiveness on the logical and rhetorical [persuasive] power of the preacher could engender only a faith that rested upon the same supports, and such a faith would be at the mercy of any superior show of logic and oratory, and thus completely insecure. . . . Paul's preaching, however, leads to a **faith** which, like itself, does **not depend on men's wisdom, but on God's power.**²⁵

We, in fact, know of people in our ministry who were well versed in *intellectual apologetics* and had attended weeks long retreats for this purpose, but did not become a Christian through it. It was precisely because of their great knowledge of Christian evidences that they were deceived into thinking they were Christians. Eventually, the Holy Spirit really did come into their life, but not because of more knowledge. It was, in fact, as they observed the supernatural character of real Christians in our ministry, that God revealed spiritual needs in their life.

All of this is why "**God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe**" (1:21). When we please God instead of ourselves by embracing the apparent "**foolishness**" of the Gospel, instead of being embarrassed by it, *God's power* is free to operate because salvation by *God's work* and for *God's glory* is being recognized and facilitated. On the other hand, when we think we must rescue the Gospel from accusations of "**foolishness**" with our humanly-invented, extra-biblical arguments, such *intellectual apologetics* in evangelism facilitates *human power, work, and glory*. The Apostle is warning us that *intellectual apologetics* threatens to rob God of His pleasure and glory, rob the Gospel of its power, rob salvation of its grace, and at least temporarily rob even the elect of their salvation.

On the necessary "**foolishness**" of the Gospel (cf. 1:18, 21, 23, 27), NT scholar Gordon Fee writes:

No mere human, in his or her right mind or otherwise, would ever have dreamed up God's scheme for redemption—through a

crucified Messiah. It is too preposterous, too humiliating, for a God [and for *us*?]. . . .

It is hard for those in the Christianized West, where the cross for almost nineteen centuries has been the primary symbol of faith, to appreciate how utterly mad the message of a God who got himself crucified by his enemies must have seemed to the first-century Greek or Roman. But it is precisely the depth of this scandal and folly that we *must* appreciate [and embrace and promote and boast about] if we are to understand both why the Corinthians were moving away from it toward wisdom and why it was well over a century before the cross appears among Christians as a symbol of their faith.²⁶

Contrary to *intellectual apologetics*, mere human reasoning is not the beginning of the knowledge of God. This is clearly proven by what unregenerated humanity has done with the clear message of Creation (cf. Rom 1:18-21).²⁷ Accordingly, God says, "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge**" (Prov 1:7; cf. 9:10; 15:33; Ps 111:10; Job 32:8 margin), not reasoned inquiry or debate. The Apostle believed, "**the Gospel . . . is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes**" (Rom 1:16), not philosophical debate. It would also seem that the Church is far too interested in making its message seem winsome and respectable to unbelievers, instead of relying on that supernatural convicting power that is reserved for the "foolish," "ridiculous" Gospel.

All of which is why we must preach a "**message of the cross**" (1:18) that will sound too simple, ugly, foolish, and even offensive to those who need salvation. Evangelistic messages that are more sophisticated, attractive, and "wise," than "**Christ crucified**" (1:23) are in danger of not being blessed with the Spirit's power to save people. God promises and provides the regenerating power necessary for anyone to receive the Gospel, only where the "**message of the cross**" (1:18) is preached, because only "**the Gospel . . . is the power of salvation.**" (Rom 1:16). *Intellectual apologetics* reflects a lack of confidence and perhaps even a sense of being "**ashamed of the Gospel**" (Rom 1:16), in that it believes all sorts of things must be added to the Gospel in order for it to be persuasive and effective. In an important sense, such an approach to evangelism is unfortunately a "salvation of works."

As we have already noted, *intellectual apologetics* seems to have a fundamental misunderstanding of even why and how people get saved.²⁸ Even here in 1 Corinthians, the Apostle reminds his readers that there are two kinds of people: Those who think the message of "**Christ crucified**" is "**a stumbling block . . . and foolishness**" and those who think it is "**the wisdom of God**" for salvation (1:23-24). And the only and pivotal difference between the two is that "**God has**

called," (1:24, cf. v. 26) and "**God chose**" (1:27, 28) the latter to be saved. Accordingly, the Apostle means to exclude any human claims to having a decisive part in their salvation when he concludes: "**It is because of Him** [the God Who chose and called] **that you are in Christ Jesus** [saved]. . . **Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."**" (1:30-31).

Unfortunately, *intellectual apologetics* for the purpose of evangelism invites such boasting. Boasting about how knowledgeable we are about the extra-biblical philosophical, historical, and scientific arguments for the Christian faith. Boasting about how we can become proficient in our knowledge to victoriously debate unbelievers and refute their arguments. Boasting that our extra-biblical apologetic knowledge may have saved someone who otherwise would not have been. Boasting that something other than the simple Gospel should be communicated for effective evangelism, or "pre-evangelism." Boasting that the solution to "**the message of the cross** [being perceived as] **foolishness to those who are perishing**" is *intellectual apologetics* rather than "**the power of God**" (1:18).²⁹

It is, in fact, the great value, effort, and trust we give *intellectual apologetics* in American Christianity that exposes our idolatrous mistrust and devaluing of "**the power of God**" for salvation. It belies a belief that people are ultimately saved by human works and persuasion rather than completely by God's works and grace. As Dr. Fee reminds us, "A God discovered by human wisdom will be . . . a source of human pride."³⁰

We fear at times that the emphasis on *intellectual apologetics* in American Christianity is more about justifying ourselves before the world rather than saving the world. Paul *wanted* to appear foolish in the eyes of the intellectuals of his day. "**God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe**" (1:21). But because of our pride, we despise the fact that the Gospel seems foolish to the world, which makes us look like fools for merely preaching it with no intellectual defense. And because we crave the world's respect more than the pleasure of God, the grace of God, the glory of God, and demonstrations of the power of God, we seek to add our *intellectual apologetics* to the message of the simple, unattractive, "foolish," and offensive Gospel.

The Apostle reminds us that our part in providing saving truth is communicating the message of Christ crucified for their sins—the simple Gospel. To claim we need to, and can do more, may reveal more human pride, and a "**knowledge**" which "**puffs up**" (1 Cor 8:1) than many would be willing to admit.

Along these lines, John MacArthur comments on 1 Corinthians 2:

Remembering God's sovereignty in salvation is the foundation of a proper perspective on evangelism. Salvation does not depend on clever evangelistic strategies, or the skill of the

preacher, or a masterful presentation. It is not a human work at all; it is God's work. "I planted," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, Paul described his evangelistic approach to the Corinthians Although an accomplished scholar, adept at handling the Scriptures, Paul recognized that mere human persuasiveness saves no one. The other early evangelists also knew that truth; one searches the evangelistic messages in Acts in vain for any sort of clever manipulation. Instead, they are filled with interpretation and application of Scripture, and the proclamation of the gospel (cf. 2:14ff., 41; 3:12ff.; 5:42; 8:4-5; 13:15ff.; 16:30-32; 17:10-12).

Many in our day foolishly act as though God were wholly dependent on them to reach the lost. Nothing could be further from the truth. A. W. Tozer points out:

Probably the hardest thought of all for our natural egotism to entertain is that God does not need our help. We commonly represent Him as a busy, eager, somewhat frustrated Father hurrying about seeking help to carry out His benevolent plan to bring peace and salvation to the world; but as said the Lady Julian, "I saw truly that God doeth all-thing, be it never so little." The God who worketh all things surely needs no help and no helpers.

Too many missionary appeals are based upon this fancied frustration of Almighty God. An effective speaker can easily excite pity in his hearers, not only for the heathen but for the God who has tried so hard and so long to save them and has failed for want of support. I fear that thousands of young persons enter Christian service from no higher motive than to help deliver God from the embarrassing situation His love has gotten Him into and His limited abilities seem unable to get Him out of.³¹

The most important element of any gospel presentation is clarity of content. To present the gospel clearly requires invoking the power of the Spirit and leaving the results to God.³²

Nonetheless, while the Apostle thought *intellectual apologetics* was dangerous in the context of evangelizing those seeking "wisdom," he adds, "**We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature**" (1 Cor 2:6) Christians, reflecting the value of *intellectual apologetics* for believers, as we have discussed elsewhere.³³

A.2) 2 Cor 4:1-5

Likewise, in 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul made it clear that it is the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than the power of our arguments, that is needed if people are to take even the first step toward Christ. The Apostle writes:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry [of evangelism], we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth [the Gospel, cf. next v.] plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

³ And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, Who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor 4:1-5)

There is no mention here of argumentative apologetics as a part of the Apostle's "**ministry**" (v. 1). Rather, he "**plainly**" preached the "**Gospel**" (vs. 2-3), and "**Jesus Christ as Lord**," apparently skipping the whole discussion of whether Christ existed, was God, or was alive, points which *intellectual apologists* deem so vital to prove to unbelievers. This was because the Apostle knew what we are ultimately up against: "**the god of this age [who] has blinded the minds of unbelievers**" (v. 4). The battle in evangelism is a spiritual one, not an intellectual one, and it is the Gospel that is promised the spiritual power to defeat the devil, not apologetic arguments.

A.3) Instructions to Timothy & Titus: *Don't argue with obstinate unbelievers*

Again, we would suggest that the Apostle Paul explicitly prohibited the use of *intellectual apologetics* in his writings to his fellow Evangelists, Timothy and Titus. In the context of writing to men who were given the responsibility of defending and promoting the Gospel, he tells Timothy and Titus to "**command**," "**have nothing to do with**," "**avoid**," "**silence**," "**rebuke . . . sharply**," and "**warn**" unbelievers ³⁴ who believe and teach, "**false doctrines [and] myths**," "**meaningless talk**," "**old wives' tales**," "**controversies and quarrels about words**," "**godless chatter**," "**foolish and stupid**

arguments,” and “foolish controversies” (1 Tim 1:3-4, 6; 4:7; 6:4; 2 Tim 2:16; 2:23; Tit 1:11, 13; 3:9; cf. 2 Tim 2:14).³⁵

Such descriptions certainly apply to all of the modern pagan philosophies that Christians have been prone to debate, argue about, and interact with, rather than simply rebuking or avoiding their proponents.

The first reason that the Apostle suggests it is unwise to debate with such people is because there is little hope of helping them. He writes concerning someone who, **“does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching . . . [and] has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words”** that they are **“conceited [i.e. not receptive] and understand nothing [having a] . . . corrupt mind”** (1 Tim 6:3-5). Is this really the kind of people God wants us wasting our time and efforts on? We are here reminded of Christ’s instructions to His own Evangelists in such a circumstance: **“If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town”** (Matt 10:14). Accordingly, Timothy was not to **“have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments [and the people who espouse them], because . . . they produce quarrels,”** not conversions (2 Tim 2:23).

Likewise, false teachers are, **“always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected”** (2 Tim 3:7-8), rather than being important candidates for our evangelism. Elsewhere the Apostle describes, **“rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group,”** as **“those who are corrupted and do not believe, [and for whom] nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. . . . They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good”** (Tit 1:15-16), including having a profitable apologetic debate. Obstinate unbelievers who would be argumentative about **“foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law,”** are to be considered **“warped and sinful”** (Tit 3:11), not seeking the truth.

The second reason that we are not to debate the truth with obstinate unbelievers is that it is not helpful for believers either. Such debate will **“promote controversies [ekzētesis “useless speculation” BAGD³⁶] rather than God’s work—which is by faith”** (1 Tim 1:4). Likewise, **“controversies and quarrels about words [with unbelieving false teachers] result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth”** (1 Tim 6:4-5). Along the same lines, the Apostle says, **“foolish controversies and**

genealogies and arguments and quarrels . . . are unprofitable and useless” (Tit 3:9).

Also, the Apostle wrote:

Keep reminding them [believers] **of these things** [sound doctrine]. **Warn them before God against quarreling about words** [*logomachei*: lit. “fight about words/ideas”]; **it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen** [including other Christians!]. ¹⁵ **Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.** ¹⁶ **Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly.** ¹⁷ **Their teaching will spread like gangrene.** (2 Tim 2:14-17)

Obviously, the Apostle certainly is not condemning humble but serious debate about the meaning of Scripture among sincere believers, which is necessary to fulfill the biblical commands to defend sound doctrine. It is the unbiblical and “**godless chatter**” that we are not to debate over with obstinate unbelievers. ³⁷ Accordingly, the Apostle says elsewhere:

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care [sound doctrine, by humble, serious debate if necessary, cf. 2 Tim 2:23-6]. **Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some** [unbelievers] **have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith.** (1 Tim 6:20-21)

A third danger in trying so hard to accommodate the Christian faith to the thinking of unbelievers is that the Christian faith may be compromised in order to do so.

Fourthly, as we warned concerning the promotion of *intellectual apologetics* with unbelievers, arguing sound doctrine with false teachers may be motivated too much by our pride and an unhealthy desire to be “**quarrelsome**,” (1 Tim 3:3) which actually disqualifies a man from being one of God’s teachers (cf. 2 Tim 2:23-26).

Finally, let us summarize by noticing this description of evangelism in 2 Timothy 2:23-26:

Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. ²⁴ **And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.** ²⁵ **Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,** ²⁶ **and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.** (2 Tim 2:23-26)

The first thing to recognize is that the Apostle is talking about evangelism to unbelievers, not teaching to believers.³⁸ This is why **"God"** must **"grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth"** (v. 25). As demonstrated elsewhere, there is no other way that spiritually dead people will respond to the truth about Christ.³⁹ Nevertheless, while it is ultimately God Who must work in the person's life for them to be saved, the Apostle instructs the minister to practice *virtue apologetics* in his communication of the Gospel in order not to present unnecessary obstacles. These virtues include **"not quarrel[ing],"** being **"kind,"** **"not resentful,"** but to **"gently instruct"** (vs. 24-25). Accordingly, while the effectiveness of Gospel preaching ultimately depends on God to grant repentance, the minister is expected to represent God accurately by being like God.

B) Historical Support for Paul's Rejection of *Intellectual Apologetics* for Evangelism: *Lloyd-Jones: "apologetics has been the curse of evangelical Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years"*

We have found a few, but important testimonies of respected Bible teachers of the past who seem to reflect our interpretation and application of 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 and the rejection of *intellectual apologetics* in the context of evangelism. It was such a belief that led Ambrose (c. 339–397) to say long ago: "It is not by argument that it pleased God to save His people, for the kingdom of God consists in simplicity of faith, not in wordy contention,"⁴⁰ which, unfortunately, describes a lot of Christian apologetics today.⁴¹

Martin Luther (1483-1546) memorably wrote:

[I]f the people will not believe [in the authority of Scripture], then be silent; for you are not held to compel them to receive Scripture as God's book or Word . . . [I]f they take exceptions and say: 'You preach that one should not hold to man's doctrine, and yet St. Peter and Paul, and even Christ, were men' - when you hear people of this stamp, who are so blinded and hardened as to deny that what Christ and the Apostles spoke and wrote is God's Word, or doubt it, then be silent, speak no more with them, and let them go. Only say: 'I will give you reasons enough from Scripture; if you will believe it, it is well; if not, go your way.'

Will you say: Then God's Word must suffer defeat? Leave that to God! . . . [It is] blasphemy [to say] 'St. Matthew, Paul, Peter were also men; therefore their doctrine is also the doctrine of men'. . . If you hear such thoroughly hardened and blinded

blasphemers, turn from them or plug your ears; they are not worthy to be spoken to.⁴²

We would suggest that Luther's approach would require more God-pleasing humility, than the pride that might motivate others to defend their faith. When we understand that people can only be saved where God is working, we will be more humble about trying to argue people into the kingdom.

Accordingly, Dr. Timothy Lull, former Professor of Systematic Theology at Pacific Lutheran, and a recognized authority on Luther, wrote:

Luther had come to think that the trouble with the whole tradition [i.e. *intellectual apologetics*] that had developed from [the Roman Catholic] Thomas Aquinas was that it tended to be dominated by its opening theological moves. Since the existence of God could be shown rationally or philosophically a style of theology developed that moved too smoothly from what could be known and comprehended clearly in creation, to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Though Thomas himself was clear that the saving mysteries could not be known by reason, much of the energy of subsequent theology went into these foundational [intellectual apologetical] questions.

This could obscure what St. Paul had taught so forcefully: the cross of Christ is not a concept compatible with human wisdom and philosophy, but only with deep folly and offense. The cross is not inspiring but a scandal. Therefore the true theologian is not the one who argues from visible and evident things (following Aristotle), but rather the one who has learned from the cross that the ways of God are hidden (*deus absconditus*), even in the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁴³

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), was a man well-versed in the extra-biblical topics of *intellectual apologetics* including philosophy, history, and even science. Nonetheless, we are not aware of him using such *intellectual apologetics* in an evangelistic sermon. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is typical of the messages Edwards preached as the leader of the Great Awakening and the greatest revival ever to occur in our country. Accordingly, Edwards wrote something that *intellectual apologists* should hear:

The Gospel of God doesn't go abroad a begging for its evidence so much as some think; it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself.⁴⁴

This "evidence" for Edwards was the supernatural effects of believing the Gospel.⁴⁵

Along the same lines, the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) said:

We want again Luthers, Calvins, Bunyans, Whitefields, men fit to mark eras, whose names breathe terror in our foes' ears. We have dire need of such. Whence will they come to us? They are the gifts of Jesus Christ to the Church, and will come in due time. He has power to give us back again a golden age of preachers, a time as fertile of great divines and mighty ministers as was the Puritan age, and when the good old truth is once more preached by men whose lips are touched as with a live coal from off the altar, this shall be the instrument in the hand of the Spirit for bringing about a great and thorough revival of religion in the land.

I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the Church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her.⁴⁶

Likewise, the Bible scholar Albert Barnes (1798-1870) commented on 1 Corinthians 1:17:

The preaching of the gospel depends for its success on the simple power of its truths, borne by the Holy Spirit to the hearts of people; and not on the power of argumentation.⁴⁷

At the same time, Charles Hodge (1797-1878) wrote in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 10:1-5:

The success of the gospel depends on its being presented, not as the word of man, but as the word of God; not as something to be proved, but as something to be believed. It was on this principle Paul acted . . .⁴⁸

Likewise, Dr. Hodge wrote in his *Systematic Theology*:

The great complaint against the apostles, especially in the Grecian cities (i.e. Corinth, Athens; cf. 1 Cor 1-2, Acts 17), was that they did not present their doctrines as propositions to be proved; they did not even state the philosophical grounds on which they rested or attempt to sustain them at the bar of reason.

Paul gave a twofold answer to this complaint: (1) Philosophy, the wisdom of men, had proved itself utterly incompetent to solve the great problems of God and the universe, of sin and redemption. It was in fact neither more nor less than foolishness, so far as all its speculations as to the things of God were concerned.

(2) The doctrines which the apostles taught were not the truths of reason, but matters of revelation to be received not on rational

or philosophical grounds, but on the authority [and by the power] of God. The apostles were not philosophers, but witnesses; they did not argue using the words of man's wisdom, but simply declared the counsels of God. Faith in their doctrines, then, was to rest not on the wisdom of men, but on the powerful testimony of God. ⁴⁹

A century later, D. M. Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), a preacher who was known for his spiritual insight, said:

There is no hope for him [humanity] unless God in His kindness and grace and love chooses to *reveal Himself*. Now the full position for which we stand is that God *has* definitely done just this, and that until any enquirer comes to that point there is really no basis for discussion. . . .

Whatever his reason, Paul determined solemnly at Corinth 'not to know anything among them, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified'. This was a deliberate decision, reinforced by strong determination on his part. In other words, Paul decided that he was not going to waste his time with them in arguing about presuppositions. He was not going to start with a preliminary philosophical argument and then gradually lead them on into the truth. No! He begins by proclaiming authoritatively the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

I have an increasing feeling that we must come back to this. I am not sure that apologetics has not been the curse of evangelical Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years. I am not saying that apologetics is not necessary. But I am suggesting that, with a kind of worldly wisdom, we have been approaching the world on the grounds of apologetics instead of (with the apostle Paul), determining not to know anything 'save Christ crucified'. ⁵⁰

We could hardly communicate our own concerns any better, and believe it is unfortunate, and against God's will, that Dr. Lloyd-Jones' words have not been more seriously considered. On the contrary, *intellectual apologetics* for the purpose of evangelism has become much, much more a part of Evangelical Christianity since his day. One wishes he could still be here and be a voice to return us to the Apostle's perspective on evangelism.

More recently, NT scholar Colin Brown has said:

Christianity was, at its inception, 'foolishness to the Greeks' and remains a scandal - something not readily acceptable to the ordinary reasonable man. Indeed there is something almost blasphemous in the notion that Christianity is or ought to be accepted because it 'makes better sense' than alternatives. Not only does it not commend itself to the contemporary world as

reasonable and sensible; it ought to challenge and at times condemn our ordinary standards of what is reasonable and sensible. The God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁵¹

Intellectual apologetics is “blasphemous.” Strong words, but it would seem more true than many would admit.

C) Why *Intellectual Apologetics* is Ineffective

Elsewhere we discuss the fact that the evidences for both the existence of God and the truth of the Gospel are more than sufficient for a rational human being to believe. The problem is not intellectual but spiritual. Unregenerated humans are spiritually dead and they are unable to perceive and process spiritual truth. Therefore, while evidences for the Christian faith are reasonably adequate to prove it, the *devil-darkened reason* that all unregenerate humans possess is unreasonable. B. B. Warfield (1851–1921) explained:

Evidence cannot produce belief, faith, except in a mind open to this evidence, and capable of receiving, weighing, and responding to it. A mathematical demonstration is demonstrative proof of the proposition demonstrated. But even such a demonstration cannot produce conviction in a mind incapable of following the demonstration.⁵²

Accordingly, we have demonstrated elsewhere from Romans chapter one that unbelievers already know that Creation proves God, it is just that they refuse to accept it.⁵³ Unbelievers already know what *intellectual apologists* are attempting to prove to them, but it is not a mental, rational problem that keeps it from being accepted, but rather a spiritual one. This is precisely why God describes salvation in the following terms: **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”** (Ezek 36:26).⁵⁴

We do not reject *intellectual apologetics* because it is based on logic, as some *fideists* would do. Rather, we reject it because unbelievers have *devil-darkened reason* that will not accept the claims of the Gospel.

In our opinion, *intellectual apologists* do not adequately consider the limited epistemological capabilities of spiritually dead humans. For example, William Lane Craig, a foremost *classical apologist* writes:

On balance, then, it seems to me that on the basis of the *kalam cosmological argument*, a person who is sufficiently informed and whose faculties are functioning properly ought to agree that it is more likely than not that a Creator of the universe exists. This

argument can thus serve as one link in the natural theologian's cumulative case for theism.⁵⁵

Dr. Lane admits that two things are necessary for his approach to apologetics to be successful. First, the person must be "sufficiently informed." We have noted elsewhere that the fact that such apologetic arguments for God's existence are so complex, they are significantly limited in their usefulness for most people.⁵⁶ How many people have even heard of the "*kalam cosmological argument*" let alone understand it? Secondly, Dr. Lane admits that the person's mental "faculties" must be "functioning properly" which the Apostle clearly denies for unregenerated humanity as discussed elsewhere (cf. Rom 1:18-31; 8:1-9; Eph 4:17-19).⁵⁷

Intellectual apologists are wrong to promote intellectual arguments as an important means of preparing people for salvation. Accordingly, we can address some of the statements made in Christianity concerning the evangelistic value of *intellectual apologetics*.

Sean McDowell writes:

[*Intellectual*] apologetics is critical for ministry today . . . [because] human nature . . . does not change. People have questions, and we are responsible to provide helpful answers. . . we are rational, personal beings who bear the image of God."⁵⁸

Likewise, Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemed Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and author of the bestselling apologetic book, *The Reason for God*, says:

Christians are saying that the rational [argument] isn't part of evangelism. The fact is, people are rational. They do have questions. You have to answer those questions."⁵⁹

Along the same lines, Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland church in Longwood, Florida has said, "We need to preach [the Gospel] with apologetics in mind, with a rational explanation and defense of the Christian faith in mind."⁶⁰

On the contrary, as demonstrated elsewhere from Scripture, unregenerated humans *are not* rational, but *insane* when it comes to perceiving and accepting spiritual truths.⁶¹ And how do these men reconcile their belief with the Apostle's mandate: "**When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.** (1 Cor 1:1-2, 4-5)

Yet, *intellectual apologists* insist that God has used such apologetics to lead people to Christ. Norman Geisler writes:

The charge is made that no one ever comes to Christ through apologetics. If this implies that the Holy Spirit never uses apologetic evidence to bring people to Christ, this is clearly false. C. S. Lewis noted that "nearly everyone I know who has embraced Christianity in adult life has been influenced by what seemed to him to be at least a probable argument for Theism." Lewis is an example of an atheist who came to Christ under the influence of apologetics. God has used evidence and reason in some way to reach virtually all adults who come to Christ.⁶²

This presents a difficult question. On one hand, the Apostle said he would not use *intellectual apologetics* in his evangelism ministry, and in the following chapters (5.12-5.13) we demonstrate this approach to evangelism is never found in the Bible. On the other hand, we have people claiming that it played a significant part in leading them to salvation.

One possible response is that there may be some confusion on the part of those who testify this way. We document elsewhere how even Josh McDowell has portrayed *intellectual apologetics* as having a primary place in his salvation, but writing recently that it was actually *virtue apologetics* that initially drew him to Christianity.⁶³

Secondly, for those who had an especially powerful experience with *intellectual apologetics* in their salvation, we would suggest the possibility that it was because the Spirit had already come into their life at that point. Conversion is a mysterious process, and often people do not know the exact moment it occurs. Only afterwards, as they experience and observe changes in their life, do they recognize conversion has occurred. The point at which intellectual evidence for the faith started becoming convincing, could be after they were regenerated. Everyone who would claim to have been saved through *intellectual apologetics* was indwelt at some point in that journey and it could have been earlier in the process rather than later. One thing is for certain. If the Holy Spirit does not regenerate a person, no spiritual truth will be effective, including the best intellectual arguments for the faith.

May we suggest again that one fundamental problem with some *intellectual apologists* is an unbiblical understanding of even how people get saved? The Bible teaches that God unconditionally (i.e. by grace) chose who would be saved "**before the creation of the world**" (Eph 1:4; cf. Rom 11:5-7; 1 Cor 1:26-31), and "**those He predestined,**" He will call and regenerate so that they may be "**justified**" (Rom 8:30). The process of salvation is initiated and completed by God, because, "**The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are**

foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). All we would suggest here is that many *intellectual apologists* give more credit to unregenerated humans than is due, and assume more human, rather than divine ingredients in the process of conversion than is biblically warranted.⁶⁴

The "epistemological problem" has never been, nor ever will be a philosophical one. The problem has always been, and always will be *pride*, not philosophy. As the Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch says:

Against philosophical irrationalism [of which postmodernism is an example], [Christian] theology contends that it is sin, not reason, that constitutes the major obstacle to true understanding. Against rationalism, theology says that it is not reason but divine grace that brings us into contact with ultimate reality.⁶⁵

Pride is why people won't believe even the very first sentence of the Bible, and "**When pride comes, then comes disgrace** [because of foolishness], and only "**with humility comes wisdom**" (Prov 11:2). "**Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children"** (Matt 11:25).

God has always been in the business of shaming the worldly wise and teaching the spiritually humble. Humility is the key to really knowing the truth, and God ultimately holds that key. We cannot humble people, and it is only to the extent that someone is humble that they will receive, recognize, and retain the truth.

While the symptoms of the epistemological disease of human pride will vary, the cure has always been the same one Christ prescribed when He preached: "**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near**" (Matt 4:17). One will search in vain to find a modern, philosophical, intellectual apologetic approach to unbelief in the teachings of Christ. We seriously doubt that the intellectual pride of contemporary postmodernists, humanists, atheists, or other modern skeptics is any different than the arrogance and ignorance that Christ encountered, and no doubt His response would be the same today: "**Repent.**"

Pastoral Practices

- A pastor must seriously consider the above two sections regarding his own evangelism and evangelism in his church. First, is the interpretation of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 accurate? How do we apply the Apostle's instruction in the Pastoral Epistles regarding debating with unbelievers? Accordingly, what elements of *intellectual apologetics* in evangelism need to be

eliminated so that **"the Gospel"** will remain **"foolishness to those who are perishing,"** and **"the message of the cross"** not **"emptied of its power"** to save the elect (1 Cor 1:17-18)?

D) Why *Virtue Apologetics* but not *Intellectual Apologetics*?

A final question that can be addressed here is why would the Apostle encourage and pursue *virtue apologetics* as demonstrated in chapter 5.4, but denounce *intellectual apologetics* as argued above? If proofs of the Gospel truly are wasted on the unregenerate, wouldn't even the evidence of supernatural character be wasted as well?

The best answer would seem to be that while the Apostle refused to *prove* the Gospel, he was very keen on communicating it in the most effective way. *Intellectual apologetics* takes all kinds of detours instead of simply communicating the simple, powerful Gospel. On the other hand, *virtue* is a necessary characteristic of the messenger of anything to be believed.

For example, it is our responsibility to communicate the Gospel clearly and in the language of the hearer, all of which is necessary for even the simple Gospel to do its work (cf. Col 4:4). Likewise, it must be communicated with a perceived sincerity and integrity which the virtue of the preacher can provide. God did not make humans to understand a message not in their language. Likewise, He did not make humans, unregenerated or regenerated, to trust communication from people who do not seem trustworthy. Accordingly, as we demonstrated in Paul's ministry, being a virtuous person is a basic necessity to communicating the **"message of the cross"** (1 Cor 1:18).⁶⁶ This is true even if the elect are to be saved. *Virtue apologetics* is the power God uses to draw people to Him, much like the Gospel is the power God uses to save them (cf. Rom 1:16).

This is not true of all that *intellectual apologetics* would add to the communication of the simple Gospel. Virtue is a necessary accompaniment that *facilitates* the effective communication of even a simple Gospel. Philosophical, scientific, and historical arguments *add* elements to the presentation of the Gospel that Paul warns detract from it, making evangelism too human-centered and works-oriented.

Another difference is that *virtue apologetics* requires humility and is blessed by God to engender humility in unbelievers. *Intellectual apologetics*, however, can be motivated by pride, and its argumentative nature can even engender more pride in the unbeliever regarding their own "superior knowledge." This is certainly another reason that the Apostle refused to play the game of the Greek philosophers in his evangelistic work.

It could also be pointed out that God is not adverse to doing miracles in the presence of people He knows will not repent, for the purpose of bringing greater judgment on them. *Virtue apologetics* is often this very thing.

Our point here is not that God is uninterested in proving the exclusivity of the Christian faith, but that the *intellectual apologetics* that so many deem so important is not God's chosen means. In other words, maybe the efforts of Christian apologists and evangelists would be best spent on describing and *demonstrating* born again Christianity (*virtue apologetics*), rather than debating Darwinism, humanism, atheism, agnosticism, postmodernism, and whatever other "ism" that contradicts the Gospel of Christ.

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

Father, we thank you for the power of the Gospel to save. Help us to trust it more than our arguments. Help us to be humble in our evangelism because we understand conversion is your work. And may we be virtuous ambassadors of this message.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) How would you describe *intellectual apologetics*?
- 2) What biblical evidence do we suggest to claim that *intellectual apologetics* is unbiblical in the context of evangelism? Would you agree or disagree and why?
- 3) What practical conclusions should we draw from the fact that the Apostle commanded Timothy and Titus not to argue with unbelievers about the doctrines of the Christian faith?
- 4) Why would D. M. Lloyd-Jones say, "I am not sure that apologetics has not been the curse of evangelical Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years"?
- 5) Why is *intellectual apologetics* ineffective?

- 6) What is a possible explanation for those who claim an especially powerful experience with *intellectual apologetics* in their conversion?
- 7) Why do we suggest that the Apostle Paul encouraged and pursued *virtue apologetics* but denounced *intellectual apologetics*? Do you agree or disagree and why?

Publications & Particular

¹ For further discussion of different aspects of *intellectual apologetics* see section 5.10.A.

² Regarding the value of *intellectual apologetics* for the Christian see section 6.12.C.1.

³ For further discussion of the impotence of *intellectual apologetics* for unbelievers see section 2.2.B-C.

⁴ R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsey in *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Academie Books, 1984), 22.

⁵ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2000), 175

⁶ Both the divine "call" (1:26) and the divine "choosing" mentioned three times in this passage (vs. 27-28) are referring to a calling and choosing to eternal salvation. Accordingly, Charles Hodge writes in commenting on 1 Cor. 1:26: *Your calling* does not mean mode of life, profession, or station, as the word *vocation* often does with us. The Greek word is never used in this sense in the New Testament, unless 1 Corinthians 7:20 be an exception. It always refers to the call of God by his word and Spirit. It is to be so understood here. 'You see, brethren, your conversion, that not many wise are converted.' In this sense we speak of "effectual *calling*." (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*; online at www.ccel.org).

Here, Dr. Hodge is more accurate than John MacArthur who writes regarding the same verse: "Paul always uses the term *calling* to refer to the saving call of God, the effectual call that results in redemption." (*MacArthur's New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Parsons Technology, 1997], 1 Cor 1:26).

Leon Morris does not make this point, but speaks as if the choosing of God merely results in those who are "in the church" (*1 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1985], 47).

While C. K. Barrett translates the "calling" in 1:6 as "your own calling as Christians," he does not in his commentary on verses 1:26-29 clearly state that God's choosing repeatedly mentioned in these verses applies to eternal salvation, and, in our opinion, does not even clearly interpret v. 30 in this way. (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC) [Hendrickson, 2000], 56-

59)

Neither does Dr. Thiselton, and like Dr. Morris, concentrates on the meaning of being "in Christ" in v. 30 rather than on Paul's main point that this standing is a gift from God. (189ff.)

Gordon Fee is better, summarizing 1:26-31 as follows:

Paul turns from the content of the Gospel to the existence of the Corinthians themselves as believers. Not from the world's "beautiful people," but from the lower classes, the "nobodies," God chose those who for the most part would make up his new people. . . .

God's choosing of them is asserted to have the same design as the cross itself—to save them, but at the same time to "shame" and "nullify" the very values in which they are currently boasting. The election of such people reveals the ultimate divine intent (1:29): to obliterate all human grounds for "boasting" [about salvation]" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 1987], 78-9).

Dr. Fee elsewhere points out that the "call" in 1:26 "refers to their call to salvation" (79).

⁷ For this interpretation see Fee, 78.

⁸ Paul's words were certainly recognized by the 2nd century critic of Christianity, Celsus, who mockingly wrote of those becoming Christians:

Let no cultured person draw near, none wise and none sensible, for all that kind of thing we count evil; but if any man is ignorant, if any man is wanting in sense and culture, if anybody is a fool, let him come boldly [to become a Christian]. We see them in their own houses, wool dresses, cobblers, the worst, the vulgarest, the most uneducated persons. They are like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nest, or frogs holding a symposium around a swamp, or worms convening in mud.

⁹ For this translation see Thiselton, 208 and Barrett, 63. The latter writes of the NIV phrase "**eloquence or superior wisdom**": "They represent the outward and inward means by which men may commend a case, effectiveness of language, and skill of argumentation."

¹⁰ For a defense of the use of "**testimony** [*marturion*]" in the original text see Fee, 88, 91.

¹¹ For further discussion of Christ's unapologetic approach to evangelism see section 5.13.A.

¹² Morris, 42, 45.

¹³ For further discussion of the epistemological darkness of unregenerated humans see chapters 4.12-14.

¹⁴ For commentary on Scriptures that speak of Paul speaking persuasively see the next chapter 5.12. On specifically Acts 18:4 see section 5.13.B.5.

¹⁵ There is some debate as to which aspect of the "wise speech" of Greek orators that Paul was condemning. Some would suggest it was merely the eloquent *style* of their discourses, rather than their typically philosophical, logical and argumentative *content*. John Calvin thought the Apostle was

only referring to eloquence, but then labored to explain how people could preach the Gospel with eloquence and not violate the Apostle's words (online at www.ccel.org). This may point to another reason that mere *style* of speech was not Paul's concern.

No doubt, the Apostle desired to distance himself from both and accordingly states "**I did not come with eloquence** [attractive style] **or superior wisdom** [attractive arguments] **as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God**" (2:1).

Nevertheless, we note some confusion or obscurity in some commentators on what Paul means by the "**words of human wisdom**" (1:17) he is denouncing. Dr. Fee writes concerning the phrase:

[It] means something like "not with a kind of *sophia* that is characterized by rhetoric [i.e. persuasive speech] or perhaps reason or logic. Thus the emphasis is first of all on content. . . [H]ere the contrast . . . makes a . . . turn toward the *content* of the preaching, not its manner or effect. (64-5)

However, later concerning 2:1, Dr. Fee writes:

In a way similar to 1:17 Paul describes his preaching as (lit.) "not according to excellence of word or wisdom. . . . The NIV is misleading in suggesting that "excellence" is an adjective modifying "wisdom," and especially in translating the phrase "superior wisdom." "According to excellence" most likely refers to his manner [style] of preaching, hence "not in such a way as to distinguish myself" (Conzelmann)." (90).

Dr. Fee seems to contradict himself here and there is nothing in either the Greek text or the passage to suggest Paul is "first of all" referring to the content of what is spoken in 1:17, but to merely the "manner" of the speaking in 2:1. Accordingly, the NIV translation is a good one.

Likewise, Dr. Thiselton seems to imply that the Apostle is primarily concerned to denounce merely the style of Greek orators, rather than their propensity for persuasive argumentation. Even more so, his description of what the Apostle is referring to is quite unclear in our opinion. He translates *logoi* as "calculative communication" and *sophia* as "practical instrumental cleverness" and the two together as "clever rhetoric" (143), all phrases that seem rather meaningless to us. Nevertheless, Dr. Thiselton does note "The issue goes deeper than the traditional remark of many commentators that clever rhetoric merely stresses the importance of form at the expense of content." (Ibid.)

Dr. MacArthur also seems to merely refer to style rather than argumentative form and content when he writes regarding 1:17: "He [Paul] saw no place for calculated theatrics and techniques to manipulate response." (*in loc.*). On the contrary, the Apostle intended to say more than that.

Charles Hodge (1797–1878) was also somewhat confusing on this issue. Like Dr. Fee above, he seems to think the Apostle has something different in mind between 1:17 and 2:1-5. Concerning the "**words of human wisdom**" (1:17) he gives three possible meanings and none of them have to do with the reasoned argumentation of Greek orators. He decides on the third:

The meaning may be . . . with a discourse characterized by wisdom; that is, the contents of which was human wisdom, instead of truths revealed by God. The context is in favor of the interpretation last mentioned. In

this whole connection the apostle contrasts two kinds of wisdom. The one he describes as the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of men, or of the rulers of the world. (*in loc.*)

No doubt this is true, but we believe we have demonstrated that the Apostle's words also apply to extra-biblical arguments intended to support the reasonableness of the Gospel. The Apostle "**resolved to know** [and preach] **nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**" (2:2). This means that Paul confined his evangelistic communication to "**the Gospel,**" and "**the message of the cross**" (1:17-18), and excluded any of the extra-biblical information of *intellectual apologetics*, which, as pointed out further below, does not have *divine revelation* as its source either.

Nonetheless, Dr. Hodge wrote regarding 2:1-5:

The true foundation of faith is not reason, but the testimony of God . . .

In his endeavors to bring men to the obedience of the faith, he did not rely upon his own skill in argument or persuasion. (*in loc.*)

This seems closer to the truth, but still might imply that the Apostle *used* "skill in argument and persuasion" but just didn't ultimately "rely" on it to save people. On the contrary, Paul intentionally did not even *use* any of his "skill in argument and persuasion" when presenting the Gospel to unbelievers "**lest the message of the cross be emptied of its power**" (1:18).

Accordingly, we do not completely agree with Dr. Hodge's summary of 1 Cor 2:1-5:

In these verses, therefore, we are taught, that the proper method to convert men in any community, Christian or Pagan, is to preach or set forth the truth concerning the person and work of Christ [exactly!]. Whatever other means are used must be subordinate and auxiliary [how about non-existent if we are follow the Apostle?], designed to remove obstacles, and to gain access for the truth to the mind, just as the ground is cleared of weeds and brambles in order to prepare it for the precious seed. (*in loc.*)

In our opinion, the good Dr. lapses in his reformed beliefs here regarding the spiritually dead state of unregenerated unbelievers. Spiritual death is the real "obstacle" to belief and cannot be cured with arguments.

More recently, we believe Gordon R. Lewis, Professor of Systematic Theology at Denver Theological Seminary, and a noted *intellectual apologist* himself, has misinterpreted Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 as well. He is similar to Dr. Hodge in interpreting Paul as saying that the content of his preaching was not human information but divine revelation. Dr. Lewis writes in his book on *intellectual apologetics*:

It has often been alleged that I Corinthians is anti-apologetic. On the contrary, it only opposes naturalistic philosophies. A divisive party spirit had developed at Corinth as some followed Peter, some Apollos, and some Paul. So Paul distinguished the wisdom of all men from the wisdom of God. He said, "yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away" (I Co 2:6). If Paul's wisdom is not drawn from the elements of nature by men, what is its source? It is the

wisdom of God (I Co 2:7) which God revealed through the Holy Spirit's inspiration and illumination (I Co 2:10-14).

Although to the unbeliever the divinely revealed message may appear to be foolishness, it is not foolishness. It is the wisdom of God. The cause of offense is the content of the message, not its illogical presentation. So the apologist for divinely revealed wisdom hardly merits identification with those who disclaim such revelation. In no way does I Corinthians oppose speaking in favor of the wisdom of God. Paul does not contradict his own ministry, "I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel" (Phil 1:16). And all members of the church share "in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel." (Phil 1.7) (*Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* [Moody, 1976])

First, neither we nor Paul was opposed to using biblical revelation in communicating the Gospel. However, much of the content of the *intellectual apologetics* Dr. Lewis is promoting is *extra-biblical*, humanly discovered and developed philosophical, scientific, or historical information. For example, such apologists do not normally use biblical information to support the authority of Scripture.

Accordingly, even if the Apostle used a lot of biblical revelation to support the Gospel as Dr. Lewis suggests, this has nothing to do with sanctioning Dr. Lewis' *intellectual apologetics* which normally does not include biblical information. The evidences that Dr. Lewis would normally use in his apologetics are not divine revelation in Scripture. Dr. Lewis admits that "**God's wisdom**" in this passage is that "which God revealed through the Holy Spirit's inspiration and illumination" and is a "divinely revealed message" all of which has nothing to do with the source or content of the vast majority of *intellectual apologetics* except, perhaps, when they include fulfilled biblical prophecy.

Secondly, if Dr. Lewis is suggesting that "**the mature**" in 1 Cor 2:6 who are candidates for a "**message of wisdom**" refers to unbelievers, we would claim otherwise, as all NT scholars we know of. Thirdly, Dr. Lewis himself admits that Paul is saying a logical presentation of the Christian faith will seem foolish to unbelievers, therefore negating its value. Finally, we address what seems to be Dr. Lewis' misinterpretation of Philipians 1:7, 16 in section ?

¹⁶ Barrett, 63.

¹⁷ Morris, 50.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, online at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm#21>, para. 77. Nonetheless, we would suggest there is a weakness in Aquinas' application of 1 Cor 1:17-2:5 when he describes it as, "the suitable way to present Christian doctrine," (para. 73) apparently even to believers. This was not the Apostle's intent.

¹⁹ Morris, 50, 51.

²⁰ For further discussion of *saving faith* see chapters 6.2-5. For further discussion on the psychological process of how *saving faith* occurs see chapter 4.16.

²¹ For further support of this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:5 see section 5.13.B.5. Along these lines, Dr. Fee ends up with essentially the right answer, although his Pentecostalism peeks through:

But to what powerful demonstration of the Spirit does this refer? It is possible, but not probable given the context of [Paul's] "weakness," that it reflects the [miraculous] "signs and wonders" of 2 Cor. 12:12. More likely it refers to their actual conversion, with its concomitant gift of the Spirit, which was probably evidenced by spiritual gifts, especially tongues [on the contrary, cf. 1 Cor 12:30 and discussion at section ?].

This seems to be more in keeping with Paul's concern. The evidence [of the Gospel] lies not in external "proofs" that Paul will muster against mere wisdom and rhetoric. Rather, the evidence lies with the Corinthians themselves and their own experience of the Spirit as they responded to the message of the Gospel. (Fee, 95)

²² Thiselton, 220.

²³ For further discussion of the spiritual/mental/epistemological condition of unregenerated humans in relation to receiving the Gospel see chapters 4.12 and 4.14.

²⁴ For further discussion of the vital biblical topic of *false faith* see chapter 6.6.

²⁵ Barrett, 66.

²⁶ Fee, 68, 76.

²⁷ For further discussion of how unregenerated humanity has generally interpreted the revelation of Creation see section 4.13.A.

²⁸ For further discussion on our concerns about the misunderstanding in *intellectual apologetics* of how and why people get saved see section 2.2.C and 6.2.

²⁹ Accordingly, Dr. Barrett remarks on 1:18: "It is at first surprising to find that the counterpart to *foolishness* is not 'true wisdom' or 'God's wisdom,' but God's *power* (52). This is again because the problem in evangelism is not an intellectual one but a supernatural spiritual one—namely spiritual death.

³⁰ Fee, 73.

³¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1975), 41.

³² MacArthur, *Commentary*, Acts 16:11-15.

³³ Regarding the value of *intellectual apologetics* for believers see section 6.12.C.1.

³⁴ A careful study of how Paul describes the false teachers throughout the Pastoral Epistles strongly suggests that he views them as unbelievers who are actually opposed to the Gospel, rather than recipients of it (cf. 1 Tim 1:11; 18-20; 4:1-2; 6:3-5; Tit 1:15 "**those who are corrupted and do not believe,**" and Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, NIBC* [Hendrickson, 1988], 8, 40).

In fact, we would suggest that those Timothy is told to "**gently instruct**"

in 2 Tim 2:25 are the believers who have been influenced by the false teachers, not **"those who oppose"** as the translations have it. Accordingly, Gordon Fee writes on this passage:

Finally, he must **gently** (cf. 1 Tim. 6:11; Titus 3:2) **instruct those who oppose him**. This last phrase presents some considerable difficulties. The verb (*paideuo*) can mean either to instruct or "to educate" (cf. *apaideutos* in v. 23; see esp. disc. on Titus 2:12), or to "correct" or "discipline" (cf. 1 Tim. 1:20). The greater difficulty is with the word translated **those who oppose him**, an extremely rare word that can refer either to the opponents themselves or to "those who are adversely affected" (Bernard) by the opponents. Is Timothy to discipline his opponents [which would not be gentle], as 1 Timothy 1:20 might allow? Or is he to instruct or re-educate those who have been "taken in" by the false teachers? This is not easy to determine, since both are elsewhere seen as entrapped by Satan (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 3:7; 6:9). It is probably safe to say that it at least includes the people who have been so ensnared and may also include the false teachers themselves (although 3:6, 9, 13 do not seem to be so hopeful). (Fee, 265; cf. Knight, 424 who says it could be either).

Dr. Fee is right to point out that Paul never holds much hope for converting false teachers, as we have pointed out in this section, which explains the response that Paul encourages (i.e. **"command," "have nothing to do with," "avoid," "silence," "rebuke . . . sharply,"** and **"warn"**), which would seem quite distinct from gently instructing them. Gentleness was hardly Christ's approach to the Pharisees who publicly opposed His teaching. This does not mean that we are to be harsh with heretics and skeptics, but the gentleness that Paul speaks of would be much more appropriate for the believers who have been affected by the false teaching, rather than the false teachers themselves.

³⁵ George Knight summarizes:

The false teachers are characterized by an interest in myths (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; Tit. 1:14; 2 Tim. 4:4) and genealogies (1 Tim. 1:4; Tit. 3:9), a concern with the law or a Jewish orientation (1 Tim. 1:7; Tit. 1:10, 14; 3:9), an interest in "antitheses" that they identify as "knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20), a tendency toward controversy, argumentation, and speculation (1 Tim. 1:4, 6; 6:4, 20; Tit. 1:10; 3:9; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16, 23). (*The Pastoral Epistles (NIGTC)* [Eerdmans, 1992], 11).

³⁶ See John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Intervarsity, 1996), 45.

³⁷ Unfortunately, Knight seems quite wrong to suggest that by **"words"** in 2 Timothy 2:14 Paul is referring to "the kind of serious dispute about the meaning and significance of words relating to the Christian faith" (410). On the contrary, that kind of thing can be very commendable, God-honoring, helpful, and precisely what Dr. Knight does in his own fine commentary.

³⁸ Regarding our belief that the "opponents" in 2 Tim 2:25 are unregenerate false teachers in the Church see Book C: *NT & Greek Commentary*, 2 Tim 2:23-26.

-
- ³⁹ Regarding the psychological state of the unregenerated spiritually dead see chapters 4.12-4.16.
- ⁴⁰ St. Ambrose, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, I.5.42. (online at www.ccel.org).
- ⁴¹ For further discussion of the limits of typical Christian apologetics see section 2.2.B-C.
- ⁴² Quoted in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1* (Concordia, 1950), 296.
- ⁴³ Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 47.
- ⁴⁴ Edwards, *Affections*, I.1.
- ⁴⁵ For evidence that Jonathan Edwards supported *virtue apologetics* see section 5.9.A.3.
- ⁴⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1: The Early Years* (Banner of Truth, 1962), v.
- ⁴⁷ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Findex.Com, 1999), 1 Cor 1:17.
- ⁴⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Findex.Com, 2003). While the application is correct, Dr. Hodge derived this statement from what we believe to be an incorrect interpretation of 2 Corinthians 10:1-5 as argued below in section ?.
- ⁴⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Edward N. Gross ed., abridged version, (Presbyterians & Reformed Publishing, 1992), 441, underlining added
- ⁵⁰ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*, (Staples, 1958), 13-14, underlining added.
- ⁵¹ Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1984), 207, underlining added.
- ⁵² B. B. Warfield, "On Faith In Its Psychological Aspects," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Oxford University Press, 1932; Repr. 2000 by Baker), IX: 335-6.
- ⁵³ For further discussion regarding the "insanity of humanity" particularly regarding Creation see section 4.13.A.
- ⁵⁴ For a particularly good critique of *natural theology* see Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Intervarsity, 2002), 98-117.
- ⁵⁵ William Lane Craig in *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven Cowan, ed. (Zondervan, 2000), 51.
- ⁵⁶ For further critique of the complexity of *intellectual apologetics* see section 5.14.F.
- ⁵⁷ For further discussion regarding the "insanity of humanity" particularly

regarding Creation see section 4.13.A.

⁵⁸ Sean McDowell, in *Apologetics for a New Generation*, Sean McDowell, ed. (Harvest House, 2009), 17.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶¹ For further discussion regarding the “insanity of humanity” particularly regarding Creation see section 4.13.A.

⁶² Norm Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Baker Book House, 1976), 41.

⁶³ For further regarding Josh McDowell’s testimony see section 5.10.C.

⁶⁴ For further discussion on the ingredients of *saving faith* see chapter 6.3.

⁶⁵ Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit* (InterVarsity, 1992), 59.

⁶⁶ For further on *virtue apologetics* in Paul’s ministry see section 5.4.A.