



Mere Apologetics

*How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith
by Alister McGrath*

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Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith

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CHAPTER 1: GETTING STARTED (Pgs. 11-25)

Our mandate has been given by Christ in the Great Commission both with content for teaching and power for execution. Christ's word is what we teach and God's presence is what Jesus promised. That's why when we are about doing the Masters business never are we to think we're alone.

We are to understand apologetics as the reasoned defense of the Faith which must be practiced with gentleness and respect toward outsiders—those who are our persecutors (Pg.16 see section). Apologetics defends, commends, and translates the Faith to seekers and believers. When *defending* we must answer honest questions and be person relative. When *commending* we must show the wonder and splendor of the kingdom. And when *translating*, we must do so exegetically, hermeneutically and humanly explain terms so that a child can understand our meaning.

Christians wanting to grow in their faith need to and must find answers to their questions. They must mine the riches of the faith and get proficient at explaining it creatively without losing the substance of the gospel.

The distinction between Apologetics and Evangelism is important and not so easy. The former explains the Faith and removes barriers to hearing its proclamation and invitation as the latter does. Sometimes these two are neglected—apologetics (pg.22) and evangelism (pg.22)

Apologetics and evangelism are necessary conditions for real conversions to obtain, but not a sufficient condition until the Holy Spirits' activity manifests in the souls of dead people to bring them to life.

CHAPTER 2: APOLOGETICS AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE (Pgs. 27-40)

Our apologetics must be in touch with the culture and audience before us. While we can and do learn from the past, it's important to speak in contemporary terms in order to humanly connect with others.

McGrath writes about modernity and post-modernity. *Modernity* (M) viewed human reason as universal, available to all, able to unlock the mysteries of life, and argument was reasons tool for the task. During this era, Christian apologetics mainly focused on reason and rational arguments to commend the

faith, but neglected the relational and creative side of being human (pg. 28). This moreover minimized the mystery of the Faith (E.g., the Trinity was not used as an apologetic) and in order to win arguments some gave over too much real estate and assumed the opponents worldview and ended up losing the heart of the matter.

Post-Modernity (PM) is not easy to define but is easier to describe. It saw (M) as a failure needing correction. Of course not all of (M's) ideas are bad. Thus (PM) attempted to combine the best of (M's) and that of Classical Tradition (CT) while removing their undesirable aspects. Among these undesirable aspects was *uniformitarianism*—a kind of reductionism that has a “total-scheme” of reality like Marxism. PM's see this as a “straight-jacket” that essentially infringes on human freedom. Now PM's reject several things.

First, they reject the notion that there's only one right or wrong way to live. Second, they see “sameness” as belittling to human freedom, thus diversity is to be celebrated. Therefore any metanarrative is to be rejected as a way of looking at the world. Third, they see reason not as universal but rather contextual and relative. Fourth, they have a suspicious view of truth and hold that it's used by the powerful to justify their oppression and to maintain their positions of power and authority. Fifth, they reject the idea that history has some kind of *telos* (E.g., Jesus of Nazareth). Sixth, they refuse the view that the “self” has some point of reference, but instead the “self” is a fluid way of seeing ourselves.

PM's contributes at least two appreciative qualities. First, it's a secular worldview that does not define what's “right/wrong” and is neither pro/con Christianity. Second, this movement in culture presents an opportunity for a new apologetic approach focused not merely on reason and arguments but also on story, imagination (i.e., the parables of Christ) and an incarnational approach.

How are we to reach our culture and do apologetics in this milieu? We must first start by knowing the Gospel, secondly understanding our times and thus tailor-make our approach accordingly, third, so that the content of the message remains faithful to the /Master, while the methods adapt to the audience for human connection.

CHAPTER 3: THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR APOLOGETICS (Pgs. 41-55)

In this chapter McGrath argues that apologetics is not primarily about argumentation and winning arguments but rather about being mastered by the

Christian faith in such a way that its ideas, themes, and values are deeply embedded in our souls.

Simon, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael were impacted not by arguments but by an encounter with Christ. This means that we need to get people to behold who Jesus is in the gospel accounts. That's a powerful apologetic. When we point people to Jesus they have an opportunity to behold his glory and thus be transformed from death to life.

Again, McGrath accentuates the fact that if God does not move upon dead hearts, there will be no change. Their blindness must therefore be removed in order for them to see. We have the small role of removing obstacles to the faith through apologetic engagement, but only God can heal the malady of sin.

McGrath uses the analogy of penicillin to show that God is the healer (pg.46), he then uses the analogy of landscapes to show how we need to help people discover the glories of the faith (pg.47), and he uses the analogy of a prism to show the many facets of the Christian gospel help one appreciate the other facets (pgs.47-48).

McGrath reminds us that we are to show that the cross grounds human forgiveness, how it coupled with the resurrection grounds death's end, how the cross also brings healing to our broken lives and finally that the cross displays God's love. We accomplish this by establishing the historicity and thereby the significance of the aforesaid. But we must do this gently with those who struggle with any of the areas mentioned.

This means that there's forgiveness for sinners, healing for the broken, relief for those fearing death, and for the unloved God's boundless mercies demonstrated.

CHAPTER 4: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AUDIENCE (Pgs. 57-70)

In this chapter McGrath argues that the book of Acts and the Gospel accounts should be used as an apologetic for non-believers and skeptics seeking faith. The reason is because unlike Paul's letters which are primarily addressed to the believing community (his audience) not skeptical seekers, Acts and the Gospels are.

In the book of Acts, McGrath points out three different apologetic approaches that are audience sensitive thus making the gospel presentation more impacting. First, before his Jewish audience, *Peter's apologetic appeals to the Old*

Testament for his proclamation. He explained the fact of Christ's life, death and resurrection and interpreted its meaning, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth is the long awaited Messiah. Peter appealed to *the* authority for monotheistic Jews—Torah, and grounded his message in it (Acts 2-4).

Second, before his Athenian audience, *Paul's apologetic appeals to common ground on Mars Hill.* Here, Paul explains the nature of who the "unknown God" is, by appealing to creation, their poets and finally Christ's resurrection. Had Paul appealed first to the Scriptures, it would not have been effective (he probably wouldn't have gotten an audience) because Torah was not authoritative to the Athenians, but their philosophers were (Acts 17).

Third, before the Roman Court, *Paul's apologetic appeals to legal terminology and reasoning.* The apostle here by using the language of the court culminates his message in Christ's resurrection which assures God's nearness and thus none can hide from Him (Acts 25-27).

These examples serve as a reminder to all believers that the audience does and should (generally speaking) consider the audience before a particular apologetic approach is followed.

McGrath affirms that critics and skeptics abound, thus depending on the person and the situation, our methods must change but never our message. That's obvious in Acts and should be in our encounters as well. This will require loving sacrifice of our time, energy and money to get better equipped. See pages 68-70 for general and specific examples of dealing with differing worldviews.

CHAPTER 5: THE REASONABLENESS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH (Pgs. 71-91)

McGrath argues that through arguments and evidence Christianity's reasonableness obtains and makes more sense out of reality as we know it than its' rivals, thus giving veracity to Christianity's claims.

When addressing the issue of faith McGrath for me was not as clear. He seemed to argue that the Christian faith is cognitively true (i.e., believing "x" is true), relational and existential (i.e., trust in a person—Christ, not just an idea). He points out that the New Atheists, as everyone else, comes at reality with presuppositions that are not argued but asserted. I believe McGrath's point is that like Christians, these atheists believe things they also can't prove to be true.

McGrath then focuses on how we all know things and differentiates between mathematical certainty and abductive probability, and explains that

every area of human knowledge falls into one or the other category. He continues and holds that if Christianity's reasonableness is not championed, people will view it as irrational and thus defenseless. In the spirit of C.S. Lewis McGrath points out that through the reasonableness of Christianity it illumines all of reality as we know it.

He then explains how philosophy can help us apologetically by showing us how to arrive at: causal explanations, inferences to the best explanations and unificatory explanations. There's more. Yet, for all the help this chapter gives, it seemed to me that McGrath lacked clarity on the use of terms like: *faith, belief, etc.*, which left me a bit frustrated. I guess that's part of the writing, communicating and learning enterprise for us all.

CHAPTER 6: POINTERS TO FAITH—Approaches to Apologetic Engagement (Pgs. 93-124)

We live in a world and society that's inundated with information but simultaneously can't synthesize it. That is, what the information *points to* and *what's its significance* eludes us. McGrath reminds the reader that: "*Christianity gives us a way, of bringing order and intelligibility to our many and complex observations of the natural world, human history, and personal experience*". Moreover, it allows us to integrate what is discovered so that a mosaic or tapestry of reality as we know it obtains.

He argues for a *cumulative case approach* to apologetic engagement. Here, what we observe from the external and internal world of human experience makes rational sense from a Christian worldview which helps us synthesize and thus unfold life's meaning.

McGrath acknowledges that our epistemological finitude (limited view of knowledge) is real when compared to deductive vs. abductive arguments, the latter of which yields probabilities as opposed to mathematic certainties and that's why using a cumulative case approach to apologetics is a credible strategy. It's likened unto the court room approach of allowable evidence that's "beyond a reasonable doubt" to either indict or acquit the defendant.

The cumulative case approach according to McGrath are "pointers to faith" such as; *the origins of the universe* along with Bib Bang cosmology and concludes that the established data fits better in a theistic universe than a

naturalistic one. Again, he points out that the universes' *"fine tuning principle"* which makes life possible as we know it seems to point out that there's a designer who had us in mind, rather than blind, random chance events. Moreover, he considers *the structure of the physical world* and its predictable constants which make science possible and concludes that a theistic worldview makes better sense of the data than a chaotic one.

McGrath offers other clues in his cumulative case pointers to faith which include: human morality, a persons' desire, the issue of beauty, the need for relationships, and the concept of eternity as a means to "weave" a coherent "tapestry" of reality in order to get a conversation started. After each section he then offers the possible apologetic value of each clue and how it may be apologetically used. I think this sampling of pointers to faith is a great place to start and depending on the audience, one clue will be preferable over others. This chapter felt much like a "workshop approach" to apologetics rather than a lecture format. I enjoyed it.

CHAPTER 7: GATEWAYS FOR APOLOGETICS—Opening the Door to Faith (Pgs. 127-156)

McGrath points out that the goal of Gateways to Apologetics is to help people see what they could not previously or mistakenly thought they understood about Christianity. He chose several steps to accomplish this goal.

First, *explain the gospel* using creation, fall, redemption and consummation as hooks. Second, *use presuppositional reasoned arguments* and show how justified true belief in God makes sense of reality compared to Christianity's rival worldview. Third, *use story, personal testimony and parables* in order to communicate the gospel. Fourth, *use images of the Exile or Paul's meaning of adoption* in order to point out our human desire to belong and longing for home. Moreover, the use of the Arts helps the apologist relate popular stories as shadows of the gospel message.

The lesson I've taken from this chapter is that McGrath is challenging apologists to be creative and culturally sensitive in order to secure an audiences' attention and interest to more effectively communicate the gospel message.

CHAPTER 8: QUESTIONS ABOUT FAITH—Developing Approaches (Pgs. 157-179)

McGrath argues that the times in which we live must and will dictate the questions we are asked and the requisite answers we give. A critical key is to never answer a question that's not being asked. This is a pit many have fallen into and must be avoided if we desire to effectively connect with skeptics or seekers.

Whether in an Islamic, rationalist, or postmodern context, the apologist must welcome challenging questions and not see them as threats but as part of the journey the questioner is on. In other ways, these are doors to "faith" that require a person relative response, rather than a "cookie-cutter" approach. It is one way we help people on their journey a step at a time.

McGrath thus encourages each apologist to develop their own responses to questions asked. Under the heading *Concerns and Questions* he offers the following suggestions when interacting with skeptics or seekers: First, *be gracious with people even though they may not be*. How powerful and foundational this is. People don't care about what we know, as the saying goes, unless they know how much we care.

Second, *get to the real question being asked*. Often the introductory question has a motive or purpose for why it's being asked. Get clear on that and you'll be more of a sniper with your responses instead of a greenhorn.

Third, *be humble to learn from others*. You don't know everything and it's always easier to interact with one who's not a "know-it-all", than one who's a peer on the learning journey. This does not mean that what you do know is denied, but what you don't know is admitted.

Fourth, *don't give ready-made answers*. It's robotic, sterile, and does not humanly connect. Instead, be a good listener where clarification of terms and ideas are reiterated to the questioner.

McGrath follows this section by providing a model of questions and answers that can be offered to the skeptics' challenges (E.g., God's goodness and suffering, God as a crutch, etc.) by pointing out the origins, presuppositions and problems that obtain with the objection and offers a solution. With the "crutch" view he explains that the real issue here is truth and the nature of reality, rather than how it makes one look or feel.

He finally ends the chapter by posing several questions and offering the requisite homework for the apologist to form and re-write her own responses.

The goal here is to tighten and shorten responses so that we get to the point without losing the audience.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION—Developing Your Own Apologetic Approach (Pgs. 181-185)

McGrath ends his book by encouraging the reader to only use arguments that are personally satisfying because if they are not, they lose their effectiveness humanly. He explains the importance of knowing yourself (both strengths and weaknesses) so that apologetically you have a starting point from which to spring (E.g., he was an atheistic scientist before conversion and integrates this background in his apologetic).

McGrath points out that apologetics is done either through public speaking, authoring books, personal conversations and a life lived to God's glory. He further accentuates the need to learn from other apologists by scrutinizing their approach to the subject, their interaction with dissenters, etc. and reverse engineer their arguments. Here, the "design" of apologetics is observed recalling that it's not just a discipline but also an art.

After learning the aforesaid, the apologist must then make the arguments and approach their own by incorporating who "they are" in the interaction. Lastly, he encourages apologists to practice in front of peers who can critique and encourage them on the journey. Perhaps gathering a group of like-minded people who meet regularly in order to help sharpen and enhance apologetic skill.

Above all, he explains how critical it is for apologists to be part of the Christian community where they receive and give support to the local church because (other than it being biblical) the apologetic battles are taxing on the soul and can be dangerous to it.