1. What is Apologetics: Fundamental to apologetics is answering questions commonly raised by non-Christians about the truth of Christianity.

Those questions are the following:

* Why should we believe in the Bible?
* Don’t all religions lead to God?
* How do we know that God exists?
* If God does exist, why does he permit evil?
* Aren’t the miracles of the Bible spiritual myths or legends and not literal fact?
* Why should I believe what Christians claim about Jesus?
* Why is belief in God rational despite the prevalence of evil in the world?
* What facts support the church’s testimony that Jesus rose from the dead?
* Can we be certain Christianity is true?
* How can our faith in Christ be based on something more secure than our own understanding without descending into an irrational emotionalism?
* On what basis do we claim that Christianity is the truth?
* What is the relationship between apologetics and theology?
* Should apologetics engage in a philosophical defense of the Christian faith?
* Can science be used to defend the Christian faith?
* Can the Christian faith be supported by historical inquiry?
* How is our knowledge of Christian truth related to our experience?

1. Defining Apologetics: Apologetics may be simply defined as the defense of the Christian faith. The simplicity of this definition, however, masks the complexity of the problem of defining apologetics. It turns out that a diversity of approaches has been taken to defining the meaning, scope, and purpose of apologetics.
2. From Apologia to Apologetics: The word “apologetics” derives from the Greek word apologia, which was originally used of a speech of defense or an answer given in reply. In ancient Athens it referred to a defense made in the courtroom as part of the normal judicial procedure. After the accusation, the defendant was allowed to refute the charges with a defense or reply (apologia). The accused would attempt to “speak away” (apo—away, logia—speech) the accusation. The classic example of such an apologia was Socrates’ defense against the charge of preaching strange gods, a defense retold by his most famous pupil, Plato, in a dialogue called The Apology (in Greek, hē apologia).

* The word appears 17 times in noun or verb form in the New Testament, and both the noun (apologia) and verb form (apologeomai) can be translated “defense” or “vindication” in every case. Usually the word is used to refer to a speech made in one’s own defense. For example, in one passage Luke says that a Jew named Alexander tried to “make a defense” before an angry crowd in Ephesus that was incited by idol-makers whose business was threatened by Paul’s preaching (Acts 19:33). Elsewhere Luke always uses the word in reference to situations in which Christians, and in particular the apostle Paul, are put on trial for proclaiming their faith in Christ and have to defend their message against the charge of being unlawful (Luke 12:11; 21:14; Acts 22:1; 24:10; 25:8, 16; 26:2, 24).
* Paul himself used the word in a variety of contexts in his epistles. To the Corinthians, he found it necessary to “defend” himself against criticisms of his claim to be an apostle (1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Cor. 12:19). At one point he describes the repentance exhibited by the Corinthians as a “vindication” (2 Cor. 7:11 nasb), that is, as an “eagerness to clear yourselves” (niv, nrsv). To the Romans, Paul described Gentiles who did not have the written Law as being aware enough of God’s Law that, depending on their behavior, their own thoughts will either prosecute or “defend” them on Judgment Day (Rom. 2:15). Toward the end of his life, Paul told Timothy, “At my first defense no one supported me” (2 Tim. 4:16), referring to the first time he stood trial. Paul’s usage here is similar to what we find in Luke’s writings. Earlier, he had expressed appreciation to the Philippians for supporting him “both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7).
* Here again the context is Paul’s conflict with the government and his imprisonment. However, the focus of the “defense” is not Paul but “the gospel”: Paul’s ministry includes defending the gospel against its detractors, especially those who claim that it is subversive or in any way unlawful. So Paul says later in the same chapter, “I am appointed for the defense of the gospel” (Phil. 1:16).

1. Apologetics in the New Testament: Although perhaps none of the New Testament writings should be classified as a formal apologetic treatise, most of them exhibit apologetic concerns. The New Testament writers anticipate and answer objections and seek to demonstrate the credibility of the claims and credentials of Christ, focusing especially on the resurrection of Jesus as the historical foundation upon which Christianity is built. Many New Testament writings are occupied with polemics against false teachings, in which the apologetic concern is to defend the gospel against perversion from within the church.
2. Apologetics in Luke-Acts: Of all the New Testament writings, the two volumes by Luke (his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles) are the most overtly apologetical in purpose. In his prologue (Luke 1:1-4) Luke announces that his work is based on careful historical research and will present an accurate record of the origins of Christianity. The very structure and content of this two-part work suggests it was written at least in part as a political apology for Paul: Acts ends with Paul under house arrest yet preaching freely in Rome, and both books emphasize that Jesus and the apostles (especially Paul) were law-abiding persons. In Acts the motif of Jesus’ resurrection as vindication, his fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies, and the charismatic phenomena on and after the Day of Pentecost are used as cumulative evidences of the messianic lordship of Jesus (Acts 2:36) and of the authority of the apostolic truth claims. Along the way Luke uses the speeches of the apostles to present apologetic arguments to a wide variety of audiences, both Jewish and Gentile.

* One of these speeches, Paul’s address to the Athenians in Acts 17, has been extraordinarily important in Christian reflections about apologetics throughout church history; it is the only substantial example of an apology directed to a non-Jewish audience in the New Testament (though see Acts 14:15-17). Thus this one speech has traditionally been regarded as a paradigm or model of apologetics.
* According to Luke (Acts 17:18), Paul’s message of Jesus and the Resurrection was misunderstood as teaching new deities. Luke reports this accusation in terms identical to those describing the Athenians’ charge against Socrates in Plato’s Apology, which strongly suggests that Luke sees Paul’s speech here as a Christian counterpart to the Socratic apology. Challenged to explain his position by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, Paul set his message in a rational context in which it would make sense to his philosophically minded audience. The speech was quite unlike those Paul delivered to Jewish audiences, which emphasized Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic promises and quoted Old Testament proof texts liberally. In fact, Paul used a form of speech recognized by the Greeks as a philosophical address, such as was commonly used by the Stoics and Cynics of his day.
* Throughout the speech Paul speaks biblical truth but uses Stoic terms and argues in Stoic fashion, even quoting a Stoic poet in support of his argument (verses 24-29). Essentially, the point of this first and longest part of the speech is that idolatry is foolish and that the Stoics themselves have admitted as much, though they had failed to abandon it completely. Paul uses this inconsistency in Stoic philosophy to illustrate the Athenians’ ignorance of God (cf. verse 23). Having proved his major premise, Paul then announces that God has declared an end to ignorance of his nature and will by revealing himself. Paul concludes that the Resurrection is proof of God’s intention to judge the world through Jesus Christ (verses 30-31). This scandalized the Athenians (verse 32), in part because Greek thought generally found the idea of physical resurrection foolish, and in part because the idea of a final judgment was offensive to them.
* The result of Paul’s apology was that some believed, some scoffed, and some expressed interest (verses 32-34). These reactions cover the three possible responses to the gospel, and the small number of those who believed should not be taken to mean that Paul’s speech was a failure.
* Nor should 1 Corinthians 2:2 be taken to mean that Paul abandoned philosophical reasoning (as his use of Greek logic and rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 15 makes clear), but that he refused to avoid the central issue with the Corinthians even though it was scandalous to them. Thus Christian apologists are right to view Paul’s speech to the Athenians as a model of Christian apology.

1. Apologetics in Paul’s Writings: Closely related to Paul’s thought in his Athenian address is his argument in Romans 1. Paul takes over Hellenistic Jewish apologetics here on the folly of Gentile culture (chapter 1, first half of chapter 2), then argues that the Jews are not above the same sins as the Gentiles (second half of chapter 2). Along the way he sets forth some notions about the knowledge of God that have been extremely important for apologetics.6 According to Paul, God’s existence and divinity are clearly revealed in nature. All human beings, he says, “knew God,” but they suppressed the truth, refusing to acknowledge God and falling into idolatry instead (1:18-25).

* The statement that people “knew God” (verse 21) has been understood in two ways. (1) It may mean that all people once knew God but don’t any longer. The past tense of the verb certainly allows for this interpretation, and in support it may be noted that Paul elsewhere consistently says that the Gentiles do not know God (besides Acts 17:23, see 1 Corinthians 1:21; Galatians 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Titus 1:16). (2) It may mean that all people in some limited sense know God but refuse to worship him properly. In support of this view, it has been pointed out that the godless must know something about God to be able to “suppress” the truth about him and refuse to “acknowledge” him (Romans 1:18, 28). In other words, since the suppression continues, so must the knowledge being suppressed.
* These two views can be reconciled. The true knowledge of God—in which one knows God, not merely knows that there is a God of some kind—was once had by all people, but no longer. All human beings continue to know that there is a God and continue to be confronted with internal and external evidence for his deity, but generally speaking they suppress or subvert this knowledge into idolatrous religion of varying kinds.
* Paul’s letters elsewhere repeatedly deal with apologetic issues that arose as both Jews and pagans who had confessed Christ and become associated with the churches Paul had founded developed radically different interpretations of the meaning of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1–2 Paul warned the Corinthian believers against trying to accommodate the gospel to the wisdom of the Greeks. Paul is not advocating a kind of anti-intellectualism. Christianity promotes a true wisdom that mature Christians find intellectually superior to anything the world can produce, one based on God’s revelation rather than human speculation (1 Corinthians 1:18-21; 2:6-16).8 In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul refuted errors about the resurrection of the dead by reminding the Corinthians that the resurrection of Christ was a historical fact (verses 3-11).
* Paul argues that the heretics—who deny our future resurrection—are inconsistent if they affirm Jesus’ resurrection since, if he was raised, we can be too. They are also inconsistent if they do not affirm Jesus’ resurrection since, if Jesus was not raised, there is no point to their affirming faith in Jesus at all (verses 12-19). This is a classic model of apologetic argument, locking opponents of gospel truths in a logical dilemma.
* In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul refuted errors about Christ’s person that arose apparently from a religious context in which unbiblical Jewish and Greek ideas were mixed with an acknowledgment, however inadequate, of Jesus Christ. In this context Paul condemns not philosophy per se, but manmade philosophies that are not “according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Paul boldly co-opted Greek religious terms such as plērōma, a term used to denote the “fullness” of the divine beings that inhabited the cosmos, to convey Christian ideas—in this case, the idea that all deity dwelled in Christ (2:9).

1. The Apologetic Mandate in 1 Peter 3:15: Finally, in 1 Peter 3:15 believers are told always to be prepared “to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.” The context here is similar to Paul’s later epistles and to Luke’s writings: non-Christians are slandering the behavior of Christians and threatening them with persecution (1 Pet. 3:13-17; 4:12-19). When challenged or even threatened, Christians are to behave lawfully, maintain a good conscience, and give a reasoned defense of what they believe to anyone who asks

* Our survey of New Testament apologetics would not be complete without taking notice of 1 Peter 3:15, which has often been regarded as the classic biblical statement of the mandate for Christians to engage in apologetics. 1 Peter instructs believers to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense [apologia] to everyone who asks you to give an account [logos] for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”

1. Three key observations should be made about this text:

* First, Peter is definitely instructing believers to make a reasoned defense of their beliefs. Logos (the same word used in John 1:1 to refer to the preexistent Christ) is a very flexible word, but in this context it clearly refers to a rational explanation or account. The word apologia, while not meaning “apologetics” in the modern technical sense, does indicate that Christians are to make the best case they can for their confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.
* Second, this apologetic mandate is given generally to all Christians, requiring them to give reasons for faith in Christ to anyone who asks for them. In the context Peter is specifically urging believers to be ready to do this when threatened with suffering for their faith (see 1 Peter 3:13-14, 16-17), but there is no basis for limiting the mandate to such situations. The language is quite general (“always . . . to everyone who asks you”) and makes the apologetic mandate a standing order for the church.
* Third, Peter instructs us to engage in apologetics with proper attitudes toward both the non-Christians with whom we are speaking and the Lord about whom we are speaking: “with gentleness and reverence.” The term “gentleness” indicates the manner in which we are to answer those who challenge our faith (again, in context this includes both “seekers” and those who are antagonistic to the Christian message). The term “reverence” (phobos, almost always translated “fear”) is translated “respect” in some versions, and this is often understood as referring to respect toward the people to whom we are speaking. However, Peter has just said we are not to show phobos toward people (3:14), and elsewhere says we are to show phobos toward God (1:17; 2:17). Almost certainly, then, Peter is telling us to conduct our defense of the faith with an attitude of holy fear or reverence toward Christ, whom we honor as Lord (3:15). We do so by striving to be faithful to Christ both in what we say and in how we live (verse 16).

1. Four functions, goals, or aspects of apologetics.

The first may be called vindication (Beattie) or proof (Frame) and involves marshaling philosophical arguments as well as scientific and historical evidences for the Christian faith. The goal of apologetics here is to develop a positive case for Christianity as a belief system that should be accepted. Philosophically, this means drawing out the logical implications of the Christian worldview so that they can be clearly seen and contrasted with alternate worldviews. Such a contrast necessarily raises the issue of criteria of verification if these competing truth claims are to be assessed. The question of the criteria by which Christianity is proved is a fundamental point of contention among proponents of the various kinds of Christian apologetic systems.

The second function is defense. This function is closest to the New Testament and early Christian use of the word apologia: defending Christianity against the plethora of attacks made against it in every generation by critics of varying belief systems. This function involves clarifying the Christian position in light of misunderstandings and misrepresentations; answering objections, criticisms, or questions from non-Christians; and in general clearing away any intellectual difficulties that nonbelievers claim stand in the way of their coming to faith. More generally, the purpose of apologetics as defense is not so much to show that Christianity is true as to show that it is credible.

The third function is refutation of opposing beliefs (what Frame calls “offense”). This nction focuses on answering, not specific objections to Christianity, but the arguments non-Christians give in support of their own beliefs. Most apologists agree that refutation cannot stand alone, since proving a non-Christian religion or philosophy to be false does not prove that Christianity is true. Nevertheless, it is an essential function of apologetics.

The fourth function is persuasion. By this we do not mean merely convincing people that Christianity is true, but persuading them to apply its truth to their life. This function focuses on bringing non-Christians to the point of commitment. The apologist’s intent is not merely to win an intellectual argument, but to persuade people to commit their lives and eternal futures into the trust of the Son of God who died for them. We might also speak of this function as evangelism or witness.

These four aspects or functions of apologetics have differing and complementary goals or intentions with respect to reason.

Apologetics as proof shows that Christianity is reasonable; its purpose is to give the non-Christian good reasons to embrace the Christian faith.

Apologetics as defense shows that Christianity is not unreasonable; its purpose is to show that the non-Christian will not be acting irrationally by trusting in Christ or by accepting the Bible as God’s word.

Apologetics as refutation shows that non-Christian thought is unreasonable. The purpose of refuting non-Christian belief systems is to confront non-Christians with the irrationality of their position.

Apologetics as persuasion takes into consideration the fact that Christianity is not known by reason alone. The apologist seeks to persuade non-Christians to trust Christ, not merely to accept truth claims about Christ, and this purpose necessitates realizing the personal dimension in apologetic encounters and in every conversion to faith in Christ.