

A Biblical Model for Apologetics

By Dave Van Bebber



In the second chapter of Acts, the Apostle Peter delivers the first sermon of the early church. Peter cites numerous Old Testament texts to provide background for this rhetorical act.¹ In the course of the monologue, he quotes from the books of Joel and Psalms presupposing that God has spoken through the Israelite prophets. Peter's presupposition provides mutual framework, credibility, and a valid argument.² This method establishes a pattern that all preachers in the early church follow.³

Investigating a sample of the sermons given by the early church allows one to witness the apologetic method employed by the first apologists. This type of analysis provides an apologist with a methodology to follow that aligns with the one, or ones, used by the early church leaders. By discovering *themes* in three of the ten major sermons from Acts (one from Peter in Acts 3:12-26; one from Stephen in Acts 7:2-53, 56; and one

¹Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 7-9.

²John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 1-12* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1994), pp. 53-56.

³John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of the Holy Scripture*, v. 26. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), p. 108.

from Paul in Acts 17:22-31), this essay ascertains the most common apologetic devices employed by the first apologists.⁴

The book of Acts presents many examples of Christians confronting opposing worldviews.⁵ Each time members of the early church deliver a defense of the faith, there are numerous similarities.⁶ The first apologists rely on Scripture as an authority; this is one of their foundational tenets. Van Til contends, “Scripture takes *the clarity of God’s revelation* for granted at every state of human history” (emphasis added).⁷ The first apologists operated unapologetically with the presupposition that God revealed himself with clarity in Scripture. This established the first system for defending the gospel message.

There are numerous methods Christians use today to defend their faith.⁸ The most common application of apologetics combines multiple approaches.⁹ This cross-application of apologetic systems can be observed in the popular film *God’s Not Dead*.¹⁰

⁴Kathy Charmaz, “Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods,” in *Handbook of qualitative research* 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), pp. 509-535; and Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of qualitative research* 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), pp. 1-28.

⁵Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), p. 314.

⁶H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 120.

⁷Cornelius Van Til, *Nature and Scripture* (New York, NY: The Fig Classic Series, 2012), Kindle Location 192.

⁸Kenneth D. Boa, “What is Apologetics?” in *The Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), p. xxv.

⁹Apologia Studios, “Apologia Academy - Presuppositional Apologetics and Mormonism” *YouTube*. Online video clip, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf7ddysgVsM> (accessed 9 March 2016).

¹⁰*Ibid.*

Most apologetic systems can be used together, but there is a divided or mutually exclusive nature that can prevent one from using the presuppositional approach with the other methods. House and Holden write:

These two systems of apologetics are mutually exclusive, whereas the other systems . . . are complementary approaches, often borrowing from each other's methodology. Evidentialism reasons *for* or *to* Christian truths; presuppositionalism reasons *from* Christian truths.¹¹

Regardless of the system one uses, the goal of every apologist should mirror the goal of the early church. It is evident from a close textual analysis of the sermons of the early church that they are using elements of the presuppositional methodology when defending the faith.¹²

In the book of Acts there are twenty-four different sermons or speeches.¹³ Polhill contends, “ten [of the speeches] can be described as ‘major’ addresses.”¹⁴ For the early church, speaking in defense of the Messiah frequently met great resistance, and delivering a speech defending the gospel often resulted in persecution and sometimes death (i.e. Acts 4:4; 7:59; 14:5). This emboldened the apostles rather than hindering them.¹⁵ Some contend the similarities in content and structure found in the speeches of the early church are due to the fact that Luke wrote summaries of the sermons.¹⁶ If this is

¹¹H. Wayne House and Joseph M. Holden, *Charts of Apologetics and Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Chart 9.

¹²Edward Black, “Gettysburg and Silence” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1994, vol. 80, pp. 547-562.

¹³Polhill, p. 43.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 44.

¹⁵N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part 1 Chapters 1-12*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 123.

¹⁶Polhill, p. 45, citing J. T. Townsend, “The Speeches in Acts,” *ATR*, 1960, vol. 42, pp. 150-159.

the case, an orthodox view of inspiration leads one to dismiss such critical analysis.¹⁷

Luke's words are given by God regardless of being the exact words or simply summaries.¹⁸ C. H. Dodd and W.F. Lane note the similarities in the sermons of the early church and attribute them to a Christology shaped by the Old Testament.¹⁹

In Acts 3:12-26 Peter delivers his second sermon, and he does so subsequent to a miracle. Peter, similar to the example of Socrates in the *Apology*, establishes credibility for his defense through appealing to the situation as requiring a rhetorical response.²⁰ Everyone in the temple sees a man “who had been lame from his mother’s womb” (Acts 3:2) get up and walk, and this begs an explanation.²¹ With his initial words, Peter illustrates this miracle is evidence the Lord has entered into the physical universe. As Wayne Grudem writes, “an event impossible to explain by natural causes” has taken place.²² This miraculous event creates an intense desire in everyone present at the “portico of Solomon” (Acts 3:11) to seek an explanation, setting up a rhetorical situation. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke argues that the critique of setting is an element of

¹⁷John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Beliefs* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 595.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 543.

¹⁹Polhill, p. 46, citing C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936); and Polhill, p. 46, citing W. F. Lane, “The Speeches of the Book of Acts,” *Jerusalem and Athens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), p. 260-272.

²⁰Plato, “Apology” in *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman. trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1956), p. 59.

²¹All Scripture is taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, (The Lockman Foundation, Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995).

²²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 356.

rhetorical criticism.²³ Therefore, any evaluation of a rhetorical act must include the setting as one of the major elements of a discourse.

Quickly, Peter shifts the focus from himself, John, and the healed man to Jesus (Acts 3:12-13). Lea and Black note, “Peter proclaimed that the strength of the risen Christ had provided the power for the healing.”²⁴ This sermon addresses commonly known historical facts when Peter recounts, “Jesus, *the one* whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate” (Acts 3:13). Peter charges the crowd as guilty of executing Christ (Acts 3:14-15). He and John claim to have seen the risen Christ (Acts 3:15). The sermon concludes with an appeal for the crowd to make a choice based on the presented evidence (Acts 3:19-20). There are six elements in this discourse: a demand for a defense (Acts 3:11); a focus on Christ as messiah (Acts 3:13, 15, & 18); a presentation of historical fact (Acts 3:13-15, & 22); a charge of guilt (Acts 3:13-15); a resurrected Jesus (Acts 3:15, 26); and an appeal to embrace the risen Lord (Acts 3:19-26). All major speeches of defense offered by Peter use these elements. Interestingly, when different apologists are forced to offer their defense these same elements are also present.

The background leading to Stephen’s apologetic in Acts 7:2-53, 56 is similar to that which led to Peter’s.²⁵ One is introduced to Stephen in Acts 6:5, and he is described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” Within two verses Stephen is “performing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). Just as with Peter’s Acts 3 speech, it is the work of miracles that force Stephen to provide a defense. The initial arguments

²³Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), p. xxii.

²⁴Lea and Black, p. 292.

²⁵Earnest Ward Burch, “Commentary on the Book of Acts” in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. David G. Downey (New York, NY: The Abingdon Press, 1929), pp. 1102-1103.

presented by Stephen are not recorded, but one discovers Stephen has been debating with Hellenistic Jews following the mention of him performing signs. Luke records the arguments prove Stephen to possess wisdom exceeding the capacities of his counterparts (Acts 6:9-10). In response to the rhetorical thrashing, Stephen's adversaries bring false allegations against him (Acts 6:11). These ad hoc attacks turn "the people" against Stephen. They take him before the Sanhedrin charging him with heresy (Acts 6:12-14). Then Stephen gets the chance to offer his defense (Acts 7:1).

Stephen's apologetic mostly recounts the history of Israel (Acts 7:2-50). Ernest H. Trenchard, remarking on the unusual nature of Stephen's discourse, notes:

It assured a hearing for the message, as the judges could not cut short a summary of their sacred history; it appealed to the valid Hebrew concept that God reveals Himself by what He does in history and not only by what He proclaims through the prophets.²⁶

Stephen walks his accusers through examples from the books of Genesis (Acts 7:2-16) and Exodus (Acts 7:17-36) before quoting Moses directly (Acts 7:37). The sermon references Numbers (Acts 7:39), Amos (Acts 7:43), Joshua (Acts 7:45), 2 Samuel (Acts 7:46), and 1 Kings (Acts 7:46). Finally, Stephen uses the words of Isaiah 66:1-2 to accuse the Jews who have falsely charged him of heresy. In the last four verses of his apologetic, (Acts 7:51-53, 56) Stephen "cut [his opponents] to the quick" (Acts 7:54) comparing them to the Israelites of old. He accuses them of being against the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). According to Stephen, the pattern of murdering the prophets continues as the Jews in front of him murdered "the Righteous One" (Acts 7:52). Although the Israelites were given the law, they "did not keep it" (Acts 7:53). Stephen then sees the risen Jesus

²⁶Ernest H. Trenchard, "Acts: Introduction and Commentary" in *The International Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, 2nd ed., ed. F. F. Bruce (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1986), p. 1280.

and cannot keep quiet. The crowd ruses Stephen. They take him out of the city and stone him (Acts 7:56-58).

Stephen's sermon is the longest sermon in the book of Acts.²⁷ Still, it contains each of the elements from Peter's sermon. In Acts 7:1 there is a demand for a defense. There is a focus on Christ as Messiah inherent in the whole discourse, and from Acts 7:2-52 Stephen builds towards this claim. Recounting the history of Israel in Acts 7:2-50 is a presentation of historical fact.²⁸ A charge of guilt is stated in Acts 7:52, and Stephen embraces a resurrected Christ and appeals for his hearers to accept Christ in Acts 7:56.²⁹ While the order of these elements is not identical to the order in the defense of Peter, they are present.

The third major speech to consider is Paul's in Acts 17:22-31. Bahnsen, in examining Paul's speech, notes, "The kind of apologetic for the resurrection which he presented is a paradigm for all Christian apologist."³⁰ This speech is the standard from which other apologists should structure their defense. The speech is different than the two previously mentioned speeches as it takes place outside of Jerusalem. Also, it had a group of idol worshipping Gentiles as an audience.³¹

²⁷Polhill, p. 187.

²⁸Trenchard, p. 1280

²⁹MacArthur, p. 205.

³⁰Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert Booth (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2011), Kindle Location 4560.

³¹Ibid., Kindle Location 4470.

Those who reject the Hebrew Scriptures as “the authoritative word from God” are the foundation for Paul’s appeal to the significance of Christ’s resurrection.³² Paul is “provoked” when “he was observing the city full of idols” (Acts 17:16). As was his habit, upon entering Athens, Paul makes a beeline for the synagogue. He then proceeds to the marketplace. There Paul reasons with the Gentiles, and the proclamation of a resurrected Christ creates conflict (Acts 17:17-18). The crowd forcibly takes Paul to Mars Hill (Acts 17:19). Bahnsen notes the language of Acts 17:19 indicates this was some form of arrest.³³ Therefore, the speech on Mars Hill is an apology in the theological sense and one in a practical sense.

Years before Paul, Protagoras and Socrates defend charges of introducing “strange gods,” on Mars Hill.³⁴ Paul’s apology, however, is for “The God who made the world and all things in it” (Acts 17:24). Quickly, he calls attention to the foolishness of the Athenian religious practices (Acts 17:22-23). Stanley Porter contends that in Acts 17:23-27, “Paul developed an argument . . . based on God’s self-revelation in nature . . . to build bridges.”³⁵ Yet, the statements of Paul provide no justification for assuming some type of an appeal to a middle ground. Rather, the apostle points out the differences between the God of Israel and the mishmash of Athenian deities (Acts 17:24-29).

³²Ibid., Kindle Location 4608.

³³Ibid., Kindle Location 4551.

³⁴David S. Kidder and Noah D. Oppenheim, *The Intellectual Devotional*, (New York, NY: Rodale, Inc., 2006), p. 13.

³⁵Stanley E. Porter, “Acts: Introduction and Notes” in *The Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), p. 1653.

While describing the diametrically opposed nature of the God of Israel and the Athenian gods, Paul quotes from Aratus, “For we also are His children” (Acts 17:28).

Bahnsen crystallizes Paul’s use of pagan literature arguing:

Paul appealed to the distorted teachings of the pagan authors as evidence that the process of theological distortion cannot fully rid men of their natural knowledge of God. Certain expressions of the pagans manifest this knowledge as *suppressed*.³⁶

Paul is not creating neutrality by using this quotation, nor is he trying to flatter the members of the Areopagus. This quotation, about Zeus, is consistent with the view of humanity Paul described in Romans 1:18-24. Humanity is in the habit of *suppressing* the knowledge of God, but even pagan writers without knowledge of Scripture are unable to fully suppress the truth. Since each human is an image bearer of the Triune God of Scripture (Genesis 1:26-27), they are never able to hold down the knowledge of God completely.

The Mars Hill speech does not conclude with a quotation from pagan literature. Paul moves from this citation back to critique the schizophrenic religion of Athens. Referencing to the words of Isaiah 40:18, Paul decries the foolishness of an image capturing the creator (Acts 17:29). Then, he explains that God is no longer going to accept religious practices like those found in Athens. Because God has made himself known in Christ by raising him from the dead, there will be a day of judgment (Acts 17:30-31). The Areopagus does not take to the notion of the resurrection, but rather than physically assaulting Paul, they “sneer” and dismiss his sermon (Acts 17:32).

As with the other speeches, the Mars Hill apologetic contains the elements identified previously. The angry Athenians forcibly take Paul before the Areopagus. Paul

³⁶Bahnsen, Kindle Location 4833.

responds to this hostility by offering his defense (Acts 17:19). In directing the attention of the Areopagus to the altar “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD,” Paul references the foolish religious history in Athens (Acts 17:23). The sermon exposes the Athenians as guilty of worshiping the creation not the creator and calls for their repentance (Acts 17:24-30). Paul tells the crowd that Christ is the savior, and the Areopagus fail to embrace the risen Christ (Acts 17:31).

The six elements noted are present in each of the referenced sermons, but they are not the only similarities. In each of the orations, the apologists identify inconsistencies in their audience. For Peter and Stephen, this involves pointing out that God revealed himself through the prophets to Israel, and this revelation leads to Jesus. Paul points out the inconsistency in the Athenians *religious devotion* and their lack of serious theology. Though the words *world view* never appear in the aforementioned sermons, each apologist’s appeals to the world views of their audience. James Sire notes, “A world view is a set of presuppositions . . . which we hold . . . about the basic make-up of our world.”³⁷ Though there are many methods one might extract from these sermons, each are an example of apologetic appeals that question presuppositions and identify inconsistencies.

For an apologetic to be in line with Scripture, it must rely on the authority of Scripture, be internally consistent, and make an appeal for the hearer to choose Christ. A Christian can employ various methods of apologetics. However, one will always reject a method of apologetics that does not call for repentance. It is evident that the first

³⁷James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 17.

apologists were not concerned with a system as much as they were concerned with preaching Christ. An apologist who plays intellectual games and would rather debate the merits of one system over another is failing to follow the example of the early church. As Paul stated, “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Systems of apologetics are only systems. Scripture might not articulate a system or method of apologetics, but Scripture clearly lays out the content requirements for a defense.

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